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THE  
RIVAL BEAUTIES.

A NOVEL.

BY MISS PARDOE,

AUTHOR OF "THE CITY OF THE SULTAN,"

"LOUIS XIV. AND THE COURT OF FRANCE IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY,"

"THE CONFESSIONS OF A PRETTY WOMAN," ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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THE  
RIVAL BEAUTIES.

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CHAPTER I.

THE reader must now follow us to a vast and magnificent apartment, of such extent that the dark walls—whereon a series of ancient family portraits pannelled into the woodwork, and encircled by a faded gold moulding, too much time-worn to reflect the light—were left in deep shadow; although, in the centre of the marble floor, a somewhat capacious table bore a cluster of wax tapers, which shed their brilliancy over a number of crystal goblets, tall-necked bottles, and a small tray containing dishes of olives, prepared caviare, salted sardines, and other provocatives of thirst. On either side of the table were ranged rows of chairs; against one of which rested a long slender Turkish *chibouque* of jasmin-wood, with a superb mouth-piece of amber, encircled by large turquoise; and the *boudaka*, or bowl of gilded clay, carefully

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placed in a small round dish of highly-polished brass. Near another stood a magnificent oriental *narghilè*; its ample vase of elaborately cut glass already filled with the scented waters through which the coarser aroma of the Virginian weed was destined to pass, before it reached the lips of the smoker; and its long pliable tube of leather, bound with crimson and silver threads, coiled like a glittering snake upon the table above. A couple of boxes of cedar-wood, inscribed with certain letters and figures, which doubtlessly certified as to the genuineness of their contents, were still hermetically closed; but, from their form and fashion, it was easy to discover that they also were filled with tobacco in that more symmetrical and minute shape which has lately obtained so much in European taste; while scattered here and there, among the sparkling wines and goblets of Venice-glass, were cards, and dice, and other necessary appliances of the gambler's craft.

In short, all around announced the necessary preparation for one of those midnight orgies in which the idle and the *desœuvré* are accustomed to cheat their *ennui*, to waste their health, and to consume their substance. And it was strange and even sad to glance round that stately room, with its angles gradually disappearing in the darkness, its grim warriors and frowning senators looking down as if in cold and silent scorn from their gloomy emi-



nence, and the huge mirror resting upon the high wide mantel of parti-coloured marble, and dimly reflecting in the distance the deep glow of the clustered lights ; and to see it profaned by such occupation. It seemed like a bitter satire silently pronounced by past splendour upon modern folly.

The silence was, however, of short duration ; for, as though they had only awaited the completion of these preliminary arrangements, groups of young and fashionably-dressed men ere long began to arrive, until every seat save one was filled ; that which was marked by the position of the *narghilè* ; and servants in rich but varied liveries began to busy themselves in opening the cedar boxes, and pouring out the rich wines, which were dispersed over the table.

Every European nation seemed to have supplied its representative to that nocturnal revel. On one side the deep flashing eyes, and raven hair, and *bistre* complexion of the Spaniard, were contrasted with the pale cheek and sandy locks of the Norwegian ; on another, the once fresh, but now somewhat faded complexion and calm hazel eyes of the Englishman, formed a marked and characteristic contrast to the dull skin and restless physiognomy of the Frenchman ; the Greek, with his finely-articulated features and mobile expression, was thrown into violent contact with the impassible

and moody gravity of the Turk ; and the volatile and gesticulating Italian had taken his place beside the polished but wary Russian. It was, in sooth, a gathering together of the nations, thus individually assembled for one common worship—for one simultaneous bowing down before the Baal of dissipation and excess. For a time, nothing was heard save the questions and rejoinders necessitated by the nature of the meeting ; but ere long, everything being arranged to the satisfaction of the revellers, the domestics gradually withdrew, and the business of the evening commenced.

In one direction a couple of gamesters, too indolent, or too impatient, to trust their fortunes to the slower process of the cards, were hazarding large sums upon a single throw of the dice ; in another, a party were collected round a roulette-table, established in an angle of the apartment, which had just been lighted up ; at the principal table, sundry of the guests had paired off at *écarté*, while others stood by, and made heavy bets upon the game. In short, all were occupied save two—one, a splendid-looking man of some four or five and thirty, evidently a native Italian—and the other a youth, whose fresh and ruddy complexion, well-opened gray eye, and auburn hair, at once demonstrated his English origin.

“ It is strange, however, Duke ; ” said the latter, as he knocked the ashes from his cigar upon the

table ; " that he should be the only loiterer, when, only a few hours ago, he announced his intention to join us early. Did I not know that he loves the dice-box better than any *dama* in Rome, I should say that the poor prince had met with an adventure."

His companion only shrugged his shoulders, and smoked on in silence.

" And he promised to give me my revenge too ;" pursued the hopeful youth ; " and that cannot be done in half an hour. However, I will not believe that Saviatti would take advantage of my ill-luck."

" You are censorious, *il mio caro* ;" said the Duca, as he suffered a huge volume of smoke to escape from his closed lips, and smiled sarcastically ; " You take your revenge out of fortune when you should look nearer home. The fact is, that you cannot play."

" Not play *écarté* !" exclaimed the young man, wounded in his most sensitive point ; " A pretty joke, indeed ! Why, I have done little else for the last few years."

" Perhaps so ;" was the unmoved reply.

" Every fool can play *écarté* ;" persisted the stripling, still more incensed by the *sang-froid* of his companion.

" Not *every* fool, Milord ;" said the Italian : " I will explain to you —— "

"I want no explanation;" retorted the youth haughtily; "I have played at Baden, Berlin, and Vienna; I know every chance of the game; and I repeat that Saviatti owed all his success to my ill-luck. Did I not win 12,000 francs at Paris in one week?"

"Perhaps so;" again repeated the Italian; "and you are very likely to lose the same sum in one night at Rome."

"You are an ill prophet, Duke."

"*Perchè?* Because I tell you the truth? Look you, Milord Squanderleigh; I could myself in a fortnight send you home to the good Earl, your father, with nothing in your pocket but your genealogy, and your *bonbonnière*—but I am a man of honour; and I have a conscience. I shall not play."

"You fancy that you are more than a match for me?"

"*Davvero.*"

"Let us try."

"No, no; let us smoke. These Havannahs are good, and cheap."

"Pshaw! Nonsense! You treat me like a child."

The Duke smiled.

"Upon my soul;" said the lordling, while a sudden flush crimsoned his handsome countenance, "if you believe that I feel indebted to you for

what you are pleased to consider as a proof of your forbearance, you are strangely mistaken; and therefore, if you do not wish me to look upon what you have said as an affront, let us play."

"*Bene*; since I can retain your valuable friendship upon no other terms, let us play." And so saying, the Italian calmly swept out of his way the glasses, cigar-tray, and bottle of Cyprus wine which were ranged before him; and taking up a couple of packs of the cards which were profusely scattered over the table, began to throw aside the low numbers with a languid gesture, as though he deprecated the exertion thus pertinaciously thrust upon him.

While he was thus engaged, three or four of the spectators, who had been overlooking another game, gathered round the two new actors; and "I bet upon *il Signor Duca*," was their simultaneous exclamation.

"We want no bets;" said the excited young nobleman; "I hate to play like a puppet, at the bidding of my backer. Duke, we play soberly for a stake—What shall it be?"

"What you please."

"You see you cannot frighten me; for, if there be anything which I thoroughly understand, it is *écarté*."

"Now you are endeavouring to alarm me in

your turn;" said the Italian noble with perfect gravity; "but I also have good nerves. I love your country—'Old England,' as you are proud to call her,—so, name your own stakes; but let them be in English money."

"Ten, twenty, thirty guineas the game; take your choice."

"I am a moderate man, *corpo di Bacco!*" said the Duke, as he coolly lighted a fresh cigar; "I will make my choice *au juste milieu*; Twenty is enough—quite enough."

"Ha! you begin to wince."

"Not yet, not yet. By-and-bye I shall tell you how I feel."

"We have never yet played together."

"Never. I seldom play; now and then, but only to oblige, as I do now."

"I will give you a lesson;" laughed the reckless young lordling.

"*Servitore*; I am always happy to learn."

Meanwhile high play was progressing throughout the apartment; and among the most eager of the gamblers were the Russian prince, the German baron, and the Hungarian count, who had established themselves at the roulette-table. Piles of gold were heaped up and swept away as if by enchantment; and long before day-dawn the German had flung his watch and signet-ring upon the fatal baize, the Russian his diamond star in pledge for a

hundred roubles, and the Hungarian the jewelled clasps of his sable-lined pelisse. Less excitable at games of chance than their foreign visitors, the Romans were masters of the field.

And at intervals, even amid that high-born and high-bred assemblage, bitter oaths were vented; and peals of hideous laughter—the laughter of mingled mortification and rage—awakened the dull echoes of the spacious room; deep draughts were drained; and snatches of licentious song added ribaldry to vice.

Yet still the play went on. Why should it pause? When its votaries had exhausted their gold, they had still their honour to trade upon; and so small strips of paper, ready prepared upon a consol of black marble, supported by gilded Cupids linked together by garlands of roses, were passed from hand to hand; and the cards were cut, and the dice were thrown, as eagerly, if not quite as gaily, as when the solid metal had been showered down in streams.

From time to time the vapour of brandy rose upon the heated atmosphere; and the unsteady hand by which it was poured betrayed the evil fortunes of the reveller, for whom the more generous and less enervating wine had lost its spell. And throughout all this turmoil, all this toil, and all this excitement, the placid duke and the reckless lordling still played on, almost in silence.

Meanwhile, however, Saviatti had arrived; but

the engrossing occupation of those around him had only enabled them to greet his entrance by a gesture or a glance ; while, apparently satisfied with this somewhat equivocal welcome, the Palermitan quietly took possession of his chair, ignited his *narghilè*, carefully placed a minute and gilded pill of opium upon the surface of the tobacco, and smoked on in silence, absorbed in his own thoughts.

Another hour went by ; and a bright streak of light intruded itself between the damask draperies which veiled one of the high casements, announcing that another day had dawned. Symptoms of weariness began to betray themselves in some of the losing gamesters ; and gradually a group collected round the principal table, and began to revenge themselves by excess of another description upon the evil freaks of fortune.

“ *Testa di Venus !* ” exclaimed a bright-eyed Roman ; “ *Ecco Saviatti*. Prince, I pledge you in a goblet of Salernian. I did not see you enter. You must have arrived just as——”

“ You were about to make your fortune on the red, when the black was turned ; ” said the Palermitan quietly ; “ you are a perfect victim this year, *amico mio*.”

“ At cards, perhaps ; ” was the self-satisfied retort ; “ In other respects, I have no right to complain.”

“ No, no ; we all know that the fates favour you



elsewhere. But how prospers your pursuit of the *Altessa* ? ”

The Roman smiled conceitedly ; swept away his clustering black curls from a forehead which might have become a hero ; and threw himself back negligently in his chair.

“ Bah, bah ! Colonna is affecting discretion ; ” said a French count who was at his elbow, with a sneer. “ Nothing is more *mauvais ton, mon cher* ; nothing is more *gentil berger*. Either you have failed—in which case you are right to keep your own secret—or you must travel a year or two longer, and learn to estimate the reputation of a *femme galante* at its proper price.”

“ Talking of women ; ” broke in Saviatti with a half yawn, as he withdrew the ivory mouth-piece of his *narghilè* from his lips, and slowly swayed the flexile tube to and fro between his fingers ; “ women and discretion, be it rightly understood—I had a most amusing encounter this evening ; and but for two untoward circumstances, I might have been as happy as Colonna implies to be.”

“ And what were they ? ” asked half-a-dozen voices.

“ In the first place ; ” said the Palermitan, in the same semi-tragic accent in which he had made his announcement ; “ In the first place, my dear friends, a jealous husband——”

“ *Eh, que disgracia !* ”

"In the next, a sudden determination to leave Rome ; or rather, to leave me."

"To leave *you* ! Impossible !"

"Impossible, perhaps ; but nevertheless a fact. And in order to shew you that I am too generous to follow a bad example—Colonna, pass me the champagne—I will drink the lady's health, and tell you her history."

"Brava ! brava !" was the general chorus.

Saviatti filled his glass with the sparkling fluid, and drank it 'off ; then, glancing round the table upon his listeners, he said quietly ; "You all remember the English Trevor ?"

"All, all !"

"Well, then, you are also aware that I first arrived in Rome in Trevor's company ; but you are one and all ignorant of the fact that before quitting England he was an engaged man. The lady was beautiful ; is beautiful,—your Altessa, *il mio caro* Colonna, is a Swiss beside her ; and your Duchessa, *mon cher* De Tremblay, a grisette. Trevor, in the pride of his heart, presented me to his *fiancée* ; and I, as I need scarcely tell you, was civil to her for his sake. Never did I see a man of his indolent and languid temperament more inconveniently in love with his future wife.

"After a career of recklessness, the father of *la bella* died insolvent, but that fact did not affect the passion of Trevor ; he was really fatiguing in his assi-

duities, and I almost began to forgive the lady when I imagined that she thought so as well as myself; for I must do her the justice to acknowledge that she occasionally emancipated herself very skilfully from the thrall; and took a liberal revenge by coquetting right and left whenever she could secure a safe opportunity; until at length I heard her name bandied rather freely at the clubs; and coupled in no very mysterious manner with those of two or three of Trevor's constant associates.

“As for myself, I knew from the first that she was the betrothed wife of my friend; and, moreover, beautiful as she was, I had seen another whom I thought fairer; consequently I felt quite at liberty to enact the Damon to my Pythias, and took upon me to hint to *il fanatico per l'amore* that he was duped. Perhaps you fancy that he was grateful to me for this modern act of chivalry? You deceive yourselves. What was the friendship of half-a-dozen Palermitan princes compared to the love of Sybil? He was furious, *mei amici*, furious. He believed what I told him, as a matter of course, for I had pledged my honour to every statement that I made; but he spurned at the idea that they had any foundation save in the censorious imaginations of those who had propagated the scandal; and so, despite all that I could urge, he still loved on, while these same slanders gained ground, and I could no longer doubt that by persisting in

his suit he was making his own misery. I felt that something desperate must be done, for his malady was beyond a common cure; and accordingly—with no slight desire, also, I confess, of preventing a step which would deprive me of a favourite companion—I resolved, despite his indignation, to recur to the forbidden subject; and even to offer him an opportunity of testing the lady's truth in so unequivocal a manner that he should no longer retain a doubt as to his true position.

“After a thousand scruples, he at length consented to undergo the ordeal; and as I had more than once suspected that the beautiful Miss Delamere was far from appreciating at its just value the very ceremonious courtesy with which I had studiously treated her, and had ambition enough to feel flattered by the prospect of becoming *la signora principessa*—for you all know the *foible* of ladies of her nation for the *prestige* of a high-sounding name—I resolved to see whether I could not, in my own person, prove to the misguided lover that he was fooled.”

“*Bravissimo, Saviatti!*” shouted his now more than half intoxicated listeners.

“I began, then, to pay my court to the flattered beauty assiduously, but cautiously. I became silent and depressed; and she soon discovered that she alone had power to arouse me from my moral

lethargy ; but she was as wary as myself ; nor was it until I had, as if unconsciously, suffered myself to be betrayed into more than one demonstration of an interest more potent than I was authorised to feel for the promised wife of my friend, that she at length ventured to inquire into the cause of my evident unhappiness. You may imagine how I replied. How reluctantly, but resolutely, the secret was wrung from me ; how I besought her to pardon my temerity ; and gradually became still less reserved, until I brought her to confess that she had already suspected the truth, and even to admit that she forgave the involuntary error. The remainder of my task was easy, but it required time ; nor was she loth to afford it. In vain did Trevor complain of the postponement of their marriage from one period to another ; for, convinced of the immaculacy of his idol, he never for an instant doubted the ultimate failure of my intrigue ; she always found some plausible pretext to delay it ; and, meanwhile, I had every encouragement to prosecute my suit which I could desire. Still her caution was admirable ; and I sincerely believe that, as the mere individual, she greatly preferred my friend ; and that, had I been simple Signor Saviatti, the son of a Palermitan banker, or of a Catanian apothecary, she would never have hesitated between us. As it was, however, I held the winning card ; and the

'dear prince,' had but to utter one conclusive word to leave the 'poor baronet' leagues behind in the race. How I ever betrayed her into writing such dangerous truths as this I cannot even now comprehend; although I have more than once had occasion to remark that there are a certain class of women, who, when they once take a pen into their hands, suffer it to run away with their reason.

"Certain it is that it was so in this instance. I wish that Trevor had not, in his rage, burnt, before his faithless mistress, the last letter with which she honoured me; and then you would have acknowledged the truth of my late remark. However, suffice it that the letter in question did most effectually open his eyes, and prove to him that his fair *inamorata* was ready to fly with me from an union to which she looked forward with dismay; and to trust to my honour never to give her cause to repent the hazardous step that she had taken.

"So far, so well; but, alas! *chi la fatto il mala, faccia la penitenza*, says the proverb; and so it was with Trevor. The English laws are frequently both unreasonable and inconvenient. He had formally promised marriage to Miss Delamere, and he was bound by one of those laws to perform his promise; or to incur the risk, not only of a heavy fine—for that he was too wealthy to care—but

also of a public exposure, with which she did not hesitate to threaten him.

“ Perhaps you expect, idlers as you are, that I am about to entertain you with the scene which ensued, when the lady discovered that she had been duped in her turn ; and that she had lost, by one unlucky throw, both the foreign noble and the English baronet ; and, *corpo di Bacco* ! it deserves narration, but I have just now neither time nor taste for such a tale ; though, in truth, her very rage was magnificent ; and her indignation as genuine as though she had been no party to this war of wits. Well, to shorten a long story, she retorted every reproach of Trevor, by upbraiding him with his own treachery, and that of his Fidas Achates ; and, when he swore that he would leave her for ever, she threatened him with a court of justice ; and silenced him, as that threat seldom fails to silence an Englishman.

“ What was to be done ? Trevor had no nerve for such an exposure. To be exhibited to the world not only as a dupe ; but, moreover, as the dupe of a woman who had forfeited all claim to consideration from the levity of her own conduct, was more than his pride could brook. He remembered too, that her pecuniary resources must be nearly exhausted, and that the prospect of becoming his wife had induced her to persist in a style of living to which they had long been inadequate ; and

thus, what from fear for himself on the one hand, and a lingering weakness for the false fair one on the other, they at length came to a compromise. Not, however, that this desirable arrangement was made without considerable difficulty; for the lady, at once baffled and bitter, was exorbitant in her demands; and poor Trevor was obliged, not only to have recourse to the Jews, but also to expatriate himself for a time, in order to satisfy her claim.

“*Ebbene!* The victim accompanied me to Berlin; and *la bella abbandonata* left London, as he supposed, to bury her regrets in the country; and for a time he heard no more of her; while, *per me*, I almost forgot her existence. Judge, therefore, of my amazement this evening, when, in a solitary stroll through the Negroni gardens—a strange caprice you will say, and one for which, in point of fact, I can scarcely account—my ear was suddenly attracted by the inflexions of an harmonious and familiar voice. I listened for several instants in order to be satisfied that I did not deceive myself; and then, convinced of the accuracy of my memory, I suddenly turned the angle of the path, and saw before me Miss Delamere in person, negligently reclining upon the grass beside one of the fountains, with her head resting upon the shoulder of a very handsome cavalier, who also held one of her hands clasped in his.



Nothing daunted, however, by the style of this grouping—for, as you are aware, I felt my strength; and was not altogether sorry to have an opportunity of making my peace, or free from the desire to see it ratified somewhat after the same fashion—I accosted her at once, and that in a tone of old acquaintanceship which forbade any denial on her part; but a change had come over her whole manner. It was neither affectedly cold, nor inferentially resentful; it was more discouraging than either; calm, self-possessed, and—could I have forgotten the past—I should say dignified. The problem, moreover, was soon solved; I began to allude to former times; and I was silenced at once by a presentation to—her husband.”

“*Il povero Saviatti!*”

“You mistake, gentlemen, you mistake;” pursued the Prince contemptuously; “you should say *il povero marito*; for trust me he will ere long the most deserve your pity, though at present he appears to be ‘in love with ruin.’ She informed me, and you will be able to estimate the feeling with which she made the communication, that she had been travelling for the last two months in Italy; *ergo*, her bridehood is rapidly waning into commonplace wedded life.”

“And who is the sacrifice? Is he one who has been kidnapped from our own set, or a mere matrimonial facility?”

“ Therein lies the point of the epigram ; ” said the Palermitan with a light laugh ; “ I was presented to the hero of the domestic drama, as I have already told you. But how ? Why, simply thus : ‘ Prince, allow me to present to you my husband—My dear Frederic, the Prince Saviatti, of whom I have spoken to you : ’ and thus, you see, although it appeared that the ‘ great unknown ’ was enabled at once to identify me as one of his lady’s quondam friends, I was left totally in the dark as regarded his own individuality. However, certain it is, that in whatever spirit I had been made known to him, he had no suspicion of the truth ; and I almost began to imagine, from the manner in which he tolerated for a time a series of impertinences on my part, that he was simply what Rowscoffski has just politely designated as a ‘ matrimonial facility ; ’ but I was mistaken. He appeared suddenly to perceive that I was transgressing the bounds of even Italian good-breeding ; for he started from his seat like a roused lion, and carried off *la donna*, without even permitting me to walk back to the city in her company.”

“ *C’est impayable !* ” shouted the Frenchman ; “ *ce pauvre Saviatti est déchu.* ”

“ Then are there two fallen angels in the same drama ; ” replied the Prince quietly : “ and I am ready to wager the hundred ducats which I won last evening of Squanderleigh, that the piece is not yet played out.”

"Pshaw! you have already had your *congé*."

"Perhaps so; moreover, the happy couple leave Rome to-morrow; another point against me; and nevertheless I am ready to renew my bet, with this reservation, that if I am not myself the hero of the second act, it will be Trevor. Who accepts the challenge?"

"Not I;" said Colonna; "I know too well the nature of the sex. The investment is a bad one."

A general laugh followed his remark; but the attention of the party was suddenly called to Lord Squanderleigh, who with a vehement oath hurled his cards across the saloon, and filling a goblet with brandy, drank it off to the confusion of all modest personages, who only played to oblige their friends.

"Milord, you are uncivil;" calmly observed his opponent, as he swept into his open palm the pile of bright English gold which he had gradually heaped up, and deposited it in the breast-pocket of his coat. "I appeal to Colonna, to De Tremblay, to Saviatti, if I ever play save when I am urged to it, and cannot decline without discourtesy."

"I care for no such appeals;" was the furious retort. "Did not Saviatti only yesterday win my money in all probability in the same way, and upon the same principle? And do not both Colonna and

De Tremblay hold bills of mine similarly gained ? Do you take me for a boy to believe that, knowing my own skill at the game as I do, I should be idiot enough to suppose that I am indebted to ill-luck for my perpetual losses ?”

All the group started indignantly to their feet ; but a gesture from the Duke silenced them for a moment, as he asked with composure ; “ And to what then, Milord, am I to understand that you attribute them ?”

“ To what !” echoed the stripling, as he turned an undismayed look upon the threatening countenances around him. “ Have I not spoken sufficiently plain already for you, one and all, to understand that I attribute them to your superior——science ?”

“ You must answer to me for this ;” said the Duca, with an unshaken calmness which formed a ghastly contrast with the trembling passion of his adversary.

“ And to me ;” said Colonna.

“ And me ;” followed up Saviatti.

The stripling listened with a bitter and hollow laugh ; and simply replying, “ I am ready ;” swallowed another goblet of the liquid fire, turned a fierce gaze of defiance upon his opponents, and strode from the room.

By mid-day on the morrow, all Rome rang with the news that a fatal duel had taken place two

hours after dawn, beyond the Porto del Popolo; in which the gallant Lord Squanderleigh, the only son and heir of the Earl of Wastingville, the hope of an ancient house, and the idol of an adoring mother, had fallen mortally wounded beneath the bullet of an unknown adversary. The authorities were all astir; the *sbirri* in commotion; and the whole system of exclusive society shaken for four-and twenty hours. And then came the relatives from England to claim the corpse, and to convey it to the family-vault, in order that it might repose beside those of its ancestors—and then, Lord Squanderleigh was forgotten.

Such was the circle in which the name of the woman who had become the wife of the proud and sensitive Mortimer was branded with indignity—amid the curses of unsuccessful gamblers, the fumes of wine, and the ribaldries of licentiousness. Such were the revellers, who, not content with branding her with past disgrace and present duplicity, even presaged for her a future still more dishonourable than either. Sybil was indeed fallen!—fallen from the brightness and the purity which compel respect even from the dissolute. She had striven and had triumphed. She was the wife of a man of honour; but her very triumph was contaminated by the fact, that he must henceforward be a mark for the world's scorn through her means; and that world not one

of upright and soberly judging individuals, who would temper their justice with mercy, and be silent where otherwise they must condemn; but a world of reckless *roués* and bitter satirists, to whom her shame would be matter of loose mirth and ribald speculation; and who would, from their own intimate knowledge of the vices of humanity, be enabled to analyse and to lay bare every working of her heart—her woman-heart,—that pure and holy mystery, which, like the statue of Vesta, should ever wear a veil for all save he to whom it is yielded up.

Sybil was indeed fallen!

## CHAPTER II.

MEANWHILE all was deep and quiet happiness at Bletchley. The ladies of the manor-house had paid their promised visit; the girls had welcomed Gertrude with a warmth of delighted affection which was balm to her meek and gentle heart; and even Mrs. Armstrong, forgetting all the brilliant projects which she had formed for her son, and satisfied that, as her husband no longer withheld his consent to the marriage, it was her duty to think as he did; and perhaps feeling, moreover, that she should in all probability be a person of much more consequence in the eyes of her unportioned daughter-in-law than she could have hoped to be in those of the high-born or richly-dowered damsels upon whom she had formerly speculated, was no less inclined than themselves to believe that Ernest had, after all, been less to blame than she at first supposed; while the worthy old squire, having once determined to withdraw his objections, did so with an open good-heartedness and generosity of feeling which removed the last shadow from the spirit of the orphan.

Only a few days elapsed ere Gertrude again

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found herself an inhabitant of the hall, and once more all the little world of Bletchley was in commotion. It was really too bad, and too barefaced, as Miss Bayliss remarked with considerable asperity; too bad on the side of Miss Mortimer, and too barefaced on that of the Armstrongs, that their company had no sooner dispersed than they thought proper to remember their poor neighbour. However, if the girl had no more spirit, it served her right, and she would see what would come of it before long; but it was disgraceful that, because they happened to be the great people of the neighbourhood, any one should be mean enough to encourage them in their impertinence; and Miss Mortimer, as Mr. Pilbeam declared, was so blind to the degrading part that she was acting, as actually to be recovering from day to day, even although he had long considered her case to be utterly hopeless: but there she was, as likely to live as his own wife, and as calm and contented as though she had been treated with the greatest respect.

However, she begged that she might not be quoted as having repeated the remarks of Mr. Pilbeam, which he had made to her quite in confidence, as it might injure him in his business; but it really made her blood boil to think that Miss Warrington and her niece had not shown more regard for the respectability of the village. Had she, or her sister, or Mrs. Pilbeam, or even the dissenting



minister's widow, ever demeaned themselves in such a way? Not they. As to accepting little presents from the manor-house, there was nothing in that; for if they were sent, they could not decently be refused; but she must say that, for people who pretended to hold their heads higher than their neighbours, the Warringtons were about as mean-spirited a set as she ever heard of.

These murmurs from the village, however, never reached the hall. There all was peace and joy. The happiness of Ernest was complete. To sit beside Gertrude, and to watch from day to day the progress of her convalescence; to see the faint flush again steal to her cheek, and the smile of recovered confidence rest upon her lip, was to him a never-ceasing labour of love. While Somerville and Mary, more gladsome in their joy, were continually on horseback, or engaged in schemes of pleasure, the tranquil delight of Ernest and Gertrude was no less engrossing. To them the whispered confidences, the assured prospects of the future, and the present calm, were full of enjoyment. They had so much to say, so much to ask, so much to hope.

It was during one of these constantly-recurring conversations, when the twilight had stolen upon them almost unheeded, and that the pencil of Gertrude, and the volume from which her lover had been occasionally reading, or rather murmuring, to her a few snatches from Alfieri, had alike

been laid aside, that a sudden silence occurred, as eloquent to their feelings as the most profuse and impassioned words. It was at length broken by a sigh from the orphan, which fell painfully upon the ear of Ernest.

“ You sigh, dearest;” he said anxiously; “ and wherefore ?”

“ Simply;” replied Gertrude; “ because I have left a duty unperformed for which I am self-rebuked; and that, even now, I have scarcely courage to repair my error.”

“ Incurrible culprit !”

“ Nay, do not jest, Ernest; for, indeed, my heart is too full for smiles. I feel that I have not acted generously or frankly towards you; and that I am, consequently, unworthy of the unhesitating confidence which you have placed in me. You may remember that, during our memorable interview in the pavilion, you hinted your belief that I was the prey of some secret sorrow; and you were right. That, however, was not a fitting moment for such a revelation as I had to make; and since that day I have suffered my happiness to absorb me so entirely, as to forget that the confession of the past was due to you. It will require an effort on my part to recall that past; but the effort must be made; for I cannot consent to become your wife until you are placed in possession of every circumstance of my early life;

and are prepared to assure me that what I have to tell has not lowered me in your esteem."

"Gertrude, why do you torture both yourself and me? I foretell all that you have to say—You have loved another."

"I have, Ernest;" was the low, but resolute reply; "and that, too, with all the ardour of a young and trusting heart. Nor was this affection the mere transitory feeling of a few months, but the one great and absorbing sentiment of my life. If I know myself, I am compelled to confess, even to you, that had my love been returned, I believe that neither time nor misfortune would have sufficed to overcome it; but it was not so. I loved where my love was slighted and undervalued; and my whole waste of affection was repaid only by the attachment of a brother. But hear me out before you condemn me. My error was that of inexperience, not of levity. I was misled alike by my own hopes, and by the tenderness of one who was indeed to me more than a mother. And now, Ernest, dear Ernest, will you listen to my story of the past?"

"Say on, Gertrude;" answered the young man, who had involuntarily relinquished her hand, and buried his face in his spread palms; "Say on,—I will endeavour to bear it manfully; but you know not how deeply you have wrung me."

The tears of the orphan fell slow and cold, as

she withdrew her eyes from the averted figure of her lover, but she heeded them not. Strong in her conviction of right, she commenced her simple confession.

She told him of the premature death of her mother; of the heart-broken father, who so soon followed her to the grave. She painted to him in rapid, but graphic words, the stately old house at Westrum which had been the cradle of her childhood, and the home of her youth; and she dwelt, with all the eloquence of deep and strong feeling, upon the virtues of the gentle and high-hearted Mrs. Mortimer.

Nor did her low voice falter when she came to speak of Frederic. There was no suspicious haste, no coquettish reservation, in the manner in which she related all their early and childish affection; she did justice to his amiable qualities, and to the high principle of his nature. She told how, from girlhood up, she had been taught to consider him as her future husband; and how, in order to render herself worthy of his love, she had striven to acquire the habits, feelings, and accomplishments which he approved. And after she had described the long hours of retirement, in which she had listened to all the confident projects of her aunt, while the subject of their discourse was yet absent, she did not even disguise from her agitated listener the eager

anxiety with which she had awaited his return ; and the bitter disappointment she had experienced on finding that her attachment was not returned, when Frederic, happy and heart-free, ere many months elapsed, bestowed the affection which she had always been taught to consider as her own, upon a stranger.

“ And what said your aunt, who had so cruelly misled you ? ” asked Ernest, suddenly looking up.

“ All that the purest and most perfect affection could dictate. She wept over the blight of my visions, and her own hopes ; and vowed never to receive another daughter.”

“ And then, Gertrude, all those visions were renewed ? ”

The orphan smiled a sad smile.

“ No, Ernest ; ” she said meekly ; “ from the hour in which I learnt that the heart of Frederic was estranged from me, and that his happiness depended upon another, the path of duty and of self-esteem lay plain before me, and I had only to follow it to the end. Frederic, moreover, was generous enough to trust to me, and to place his cause in my hands ; and believe me when I assure you that he had no cold advocate with his mother. I loved him, and to me his happiness was all in all. It sufficed that my affection was not essential to him, for me to understand at once

the indelicacy of sustaining what was, at best, only an imaginary claim. My poor aunt died ; and with her, as you are aware, the one great tie which bound me to my father's family. In my desolation I sought a home with a distant relative, to whom I was a stranger ; Miss Warrington received me, and cheerfully consented to impose another burden upon her already limited resources. I came to Bletchley, unknown, unloved, and hopeless. You know the rest."

There was a momentary silence, and the heart of Gertrude sank within her.

"And your cousin?" asked Armstrong at length, with apparent effort.

"My cousin, a few months ago, was united to Miss Delamere."

"And you still loved him, Gertrude, when we first met? When I, at once, and unreservedly, made you the arbitress of my future fate; when I placed my whole being in your hands, without a doubt, without a misgiving, you still loved this man?"

"I believed that I did so;" was the low and timid reply: "and, in all probability, Ernest, had you not, by your generous affection, taught me the fallacy of my own feelings, I should have sunk into an early grave with that conviction. Remember that my affection for Frederic was one alike of habit and of hope; that I had been

taught from my earliest girlhood to look upon him as the partner of my future life; that, although reared in a comfort bordering upon luxury, my seclusion had been almost unbroken; and that, in short, my whole world was comprised within the walls of Westrum House. It is not, however, for me to excuse the past. I have simply obeyed the dictates of my nature, and fulfilled my sense of right, by removing every mystery between us, and by showing myself to you as I am. It is for you to decide if a heart which has hoped and mourned like mine, is worthy of the love that it has won."

"Only answer me one question, Gertrude, and that with the same truthfulness which I have always seen in you. Did you love this man as you love me?" and he again seized her hand.

"I could not. I am now conscious that, in the ignorance of my spirit, I mistook myself. I loved rather the creation of my own fancy, the cherished son of my more than mother, the one fixed idea of my existence. I loved Frederic not only for himself, but for others. I lamented him not only for himself, but because with him I lost all. In short," concluded the poor girl, with a passionate burst of tears; "I despise myself for an illusion which was dissipated from the moment in which I discovered that I had long unconsciously suffered

a deeper and a more vital attachment to obliterate the past. And oh! Ernest, were you aware for how long a period your image was in my heart, while I believed that it was absorbed by another, you would understand all that I would say, all that I feel."

"I do! I do! Gertrude, and I thank you;" exclaimed her lover with renewed tenderness; "We will never again look back upon the past. What was the love of the girl beside the affection of the woman? I have been irritable and unjust, dearest; when I should rather have been proud of the trust which you reposed in me, and of your faith in my right feeling. You have acted nobly, Gertrude, and once more I thank you. And now, did you not assure me, that no other secret exists between us, and that this tale of girlish romance was the sole mystery of your past life?"

"I did, and truly, Ernest. You have now read my heart, which has not a thought that it would hesitate to confide to you—not a feeling or a hope of which you are not the object."

And still the twilight deepened about them, and the glowing fire-light alone flickered through the silent apartment, and revealed each to the other in that luxurious partial obscurity so dear to those whose thoughts are full of quiet happiness. For a moment the pride of Ernest Armstrong had been wounded. He could not brook that Gertrude, his



own Gertrude, the only woman whom he had ever loved, should have felt for another what he had felt only for her ; but he was too right-minded to persist in so weak an egotism ; and he soon forgot his own disappointment in admiration of the delicacy which had taught the timid girl beside him to consider as a crime the reservation of a fact which so nearly concerned his happiness ; and to compel herself to an avowal so painful to her feelings, in order to convince him that she was worthy of a love in which she thus ventured to confide.

Henceforward, he could have no misgivings. The past stood revealed before him. The pure and guileless heart had poured forth all its treasures of memory, and was indeed his own. One short half-hour of suffering had secured to him a life of trust and peace ; and the more he reflected upon the voluntary and unembarrassed confidence of Gertrude, the more he became conscious of the whole beauty and holiness of a nature which shrank from even the semblance of deceit and dishonour.

And Gertrude, too, was happy, for her sensitive conscience was relieved of a heavy weight. Ernest now knew, and had pardoned all. She might henceforward yield herself up, without one misgiving, to the bliss of loving and being beloved. All the memory of the past appeared to fade into so far a distance, that it rather wore the misty

indistinctness of a painful dream, than the sterner features of reality. All seemed unreal, save the actual present, with its dear delights of peace, and love, and joy. Her very tears were luxury; and the throbbing of her heart made delicious music as she listened to its quick pulsations.

Who has not experienced such an hour as this? Who has not, at some time, felt the utter inefficiency of words to embody the million sensations which well up, pure and warm, from the overflowing heart, and create an atmosphere of happiness about them? They who have not done this, have been deprived of one of those blessed privileges which leave a holy impress, like the footsteps of angels, upon the spirit, and appear to purify the whole being.

The world may have more tumultuous pleasures to offer, more voluptuous joys to dispense; but the searing-iron of passion and of vice leaves a darker trace behind, and one which no after-tears can obliterate.

Pity, that such moments of peaceful joy are brief; and that, weakened by their own intensity, they are soon compelled to give place to the commoner sensations and associations of every-day life. Like a Sabbath of the soul, they do but repose, and cannot replace, the less exalted feelings incident to human existence; and are but too frequently slighted or desecrated, until their purifying influence is negated and disavowed.

And even Gertrude and Ernest, deeply as they had felt the spell of that quiet joy, awoke after a time to a more intimate consciousness of their actual position; and once more the murmured words of affection, and the lightly-born sigh of happiness, broke upon the stillness of the apartment. Gradually, however, the tones grew less indistinct; and the clear laughter of the lover rang out at intervals, as some joyous vision floated before his excited fancy.

Meanwhile Gertrude affected to be busily engaged in collecting and sorting the wools which were scattered over her tapestry-frame, a task rendered almost impossible by the partial darkness; and, as she was thus employed, a small morocco souvenir, clasped with gold, fell from the basket in which she was arranging them, at the feet of her companion; who, hastily lifting it from the floor, laid his finger upon the lock, and was about to open it, when Gertrude eagerly stretched out her hand, exclaiming,—

“No, no; you must not unclasp those tablets, Ernest; indeed, you must not!”

“What! another secret, Gertrude?”

There was no reply, as the head of the orphan was averted for an instant; but ere long she repeated beseechingly,—

“If you love me, dear Ernest, do not open them. You will laugh at me, and I cannot endure your ridicule.”

"Laugh at you, Gertrude! why, what have you being doing? Inditing a sonnet to the moon, or composing an elegy on a dead robin?"

"Now you are too absurd."

"Justify yourself by authorizing me to open the tablets."

"Be generous, Ernest, and give them up."

"Excuse me—I covet them. You have never yet made me a present. I accept these."

"Well, then, since it must be so;" said Gertrude, half laughing and half annoyed; "you may keep them; but only on condition that you do not retain the contents."

"Agreed!" shouted the young man, as he bounded towards the fire-place to examine his prize; "Why, what dry twig is this?" he asked after the silence of a moment, as he drew from between two folds of satin a bunch of withered leaves; "And is this the treasure that I am bound to restore?"

"It is, dear Ernest;" whispered the soft low voice of Gertrude, as her small hand was pressed lightly upon his shoulder; "and to me it is indeed a treasure."

"But what is it, dearest?"

"Another and a happier record of the past;" blushed the orphan, as her lover folded his arm about her waist, and drew her to his heart; "The faded cluster-rose of the garden-pavilion."

## CHAPTER III.

THE Mortimers were domesticated at Westrum, and Mrs. Delamere established in her favourite arm-chair, as she was wont to be at The Grange ; but the old house was soon subjected to a metamorphosis which would have rendered it irre-cognisable to its former owners. The first care of Mortimer, on his return to England, had been to desire Sybil to select from among the luxuries in her former home all those which she was desirous to retain ; and this done, a public auction desecrated that long exclusive abode. The house itself was placed in the hands of an agent for sale ; but, with intuitive delicacy, Frederic so made his arrangements, that not a single suspicion of the insolvency of its late proprietors supplied food for the gossipry of the neighbourhood.

Nothing could be more natural than that Mr. Mortimer should prefer the ancestral associations of his own birth-place to the mere splendours of a strange property, unendeared to him by any familiar memories ; and consequently no comments were made upon so simple a fact ; and while these changes were in progress, little or no

alteration was perceptible in the mood or manner of the newly-married man. The quiet unobtrusive gratitude of Mrs. Delamere, who once more saw herself surrounded by her accustomed luxuries, and left to their enjoyment without one misgiving as to their continuance, revealed itself in occasional snatches of deep feeling and earnest affection, and was balm to his wounded spirit; but the excitement consequent upon these domestic arrangements at an end, a gloom gathered upon the brow of Mortimer, which not even the fascinations of his beautiful Sybil had power to banish, even infatuated as he still was by her attractions.

Their homeward journey, commenced under such unpleasant circumstances, had not been productive of enjoyment to either party. A vague, but not the less a painful suspicion, had grown upon Frederic, that the resolute silence of his wife upon the past involved some secret which she was unwilling to confide to him. And, if this were indeed the fact, of what nature was the mystery, which, as it now seemed, was to remain for ever untold?

There were moments of bitterness, in which he cursed the sensitiveness of his nature, which had not permitted him to temporize with the impertinence of the Sicilian prince, and to bear anything, everything, until, through his means, he had made himself master of all he had to reveal; for that much of it bore closely upon the

former career of Sybil, had been evident from the little which had escaped him during their one brief interview. He might have insisted upon remaining in Rome, and have cultivated an acquaintance with this man ; he might—but, in the next instant, as his glance fell upon the graceful woman beside him, he almost hated himself for his treacherous regrets. It appeared impossible that so fair and radiant a creature, whose brow and eye were full of that proud placidity which bespoke a nature as faultless as her person, could be other than she seemed. Why should he thus torture himself? There might be nothing to learn—nothing beyond those idle follies so common in the world in which she had been reared, as to be almost the general habit of her sex ; and her haughty spirit, spurning at his suspicions, might merely be revenging itself by the silence which he deprecated.

And Frederic struggled to believe that it was so ; and once more he lavished upon Sybil all the treasures of an affection as deep as it had been reckless ; but the illusion would not last—again and again his doubts and his misgivings recurred. The manner of Saviatti had made a deeper impression upon his reason than even the words which he had uttered ; and the more he dwelt upon it, the more keenly the reflection wounded his dignity.

That his wife should be thus lightly addressed, thus superciliously approached, stung him to the very soul. He who had always associated the idea of her sex with a respect and deference almost chivalrous; and who had invested Sybil, above all, with the sanctity of his brightest and holiest aspirations; could not brook that not only the woman whom he had worshipped, but even the wife whom he had won, should, without resenting the insult on the instant, have submitted to the degradation of so unseemly a display of sarcastic insolence. And if she had indeed done this—and that it was so he was only too bitterly conscious—could it be that she would visit upon himself a minor injury, and one, too, which grew out of the sensitive jealousy of his affection? Alas! he once more felt that there was no room for doubt; and that harrowing past over which she kept such stringent guard, rose up before him like a spectre of evil, or pressed upon his spirit like an incubus.

Sybil, too, was changed. She no longer returned his affection with the warmth which she had once shown in those moments of returning confidence, in which, for a brief interval, he resolutely silenced his misgivings, and strove to fasten his thoughts upon the present. He felt that she was changed, and that she rather permitted the demonstrations of his tenderness as a natural consequence of their relative position, than welcomed them as its privi-



lege. The most futile objects sufficed to divert her attention from her husband. She was gradually creating a world of interest and sensation about her, from which he was morally excluded. Even the prospect of becoming a mother did not arouse her from the rapidly increasing egotism which betrayed itself in every action of her life. The necessity for exertion had ceased; and her fascinations and acquirements were no longer put forth to win his praise. A gulf had opened between them; and the venerated roof of his ancestors had ceased to be a home to the embittered and disappointed Mortimer.

It was consequently with less mortification than he would once have felt that, after the residence of only a few short months at Westrum, Frederic heard his once adored Sibyl again and again recur to the unpalatable subject of his social insignificance; and reproach him with a supineness which left him unknown and obscure, when, by a slight exertion of energy, he might be battling his way to fortune, and, better still, to the consideration and respect of his fellow men. He had no longer an absorbing passion with which to counteract the dormant spirit of ambition she strove so resolutely to awaken; and he listened until he began to feel that she might be right; and that he had, indeed, hitherto mistaken his own nature when he believed that he was unfitted to wrestle with the

world, and to grapple his way to greatness. He did not comprehend that it was the mere yearning of an unsatisfied heart for something to which it might attach itself; for some new and powerful interest by which it might be filled, which so misled his reason; while it is, moreover, certain that it requires unusual vigour of mind, and decision of character, to enable a man to withstand the influence of the woman whom he has once passionately loved, and who has become the partner of his life. Be that influence exerted as it may, either openly and boldly, or quietly and inferentially, its general result is the same. The affection may have become chilled, the trust may have grown weaker, but the moral power remains unshaken, and he instinctively imbibes some portion of her tastes, her habits, and her opinions.

This power, regarded in its responsibility, is at once a proud and a fearful one for women. Where it is healthily exerted, it may be productive of an immense amount of good; and that it has been so, meekly and becomingly, we have many bright examples. How often has the loving energy of a wife sustained the drooping heart, and reanimated the chilled hopes, which no other voice could call back into being! How many noble actions have owed their existence to the pure and lofty aspirations of a woman's soul! How many evil hands have been stayed, how many base intentions have been

smothered, in compliance with her warning whisper! But where she desecrates this mighty influence, and, forgetting the purity and holiness of her mission, puts forth her strength only for evil, then is her power indeed fearful, and her reponsibility heavy.

Involuntarily Mortimer had become subjected to this common law, and had gradually imbibed the prevailing passion of his wife. He required a great and absorbing interest to replace that which he was only too well aware had already ceased to exist. He felt the necessity of silencing the murmurs of a disappointed heart by the louder and sterner tumult of worldly struggle.

One violent passion can rarely be conquered save by a second still more vehement ; and no sooner did Mortimer find some moments of solitude—and they were many, for already had Sybil, as has been said, surrounded herself by interests, most of which were distinct from his own—than he began to believe that he had hitherto mistaken the path to happiness; that it was mere idle absurdity to seek it under his own roof, and in the society of a woman who refused to repay the fervent and overwhelming affection he had lavished upon her by the confidence to which, as her husband, and the companion of her future life, he was so well entitled ; and that the home-happiness, of which he had once so fondly dreamt, was a brilliant fallacy, with which he had been cheated, like many others, and from

whose influence it behoved him to liberate himself.

This was precisely the state of feeling to which Sybil had been anxious to lead him ; and as she detected the workings of his mind, she redoubled all her efforts to complete the task which she had so skilfully commenced. She gradually became subdued, and almost sad. The air of Westrum, and the monotony of their daily existence, depressed her. She had no faith in the local practitioners ; and her situation made her anxious to reside for a time in town, where she could secure competent advice.

Such an argument was, of course, unanswerable, even if Mortimer had felt inclined to oppose her project, but such was far from being the case. Like herself, he had begun to discover that every thing was dull and vapid about him, and that, as regarded his estate, his steward was even more efficient than himself ; while the prospect of becoming a father held out to him new and delicious hopes, to which he was ready to make far greater sacrifices than a simple change of residence. It is true that he had hoped to see the inheritor of his fortune born beneath the roof of his forefathers, as he himself had been ; but this was a secondary consideration, which could not for a moment be placed in comparison with the safety of the mother, and the preservation of the infant ;

and Mrs. Mortimer had consequently no sooner expressed her wish to remove to London than immediate preparations were made to gratify her inclinations.

Satisfied by her success, Sybil became once more almost the Sybil who had beguiled him of his better reason. She spoke of his worldly distinction as certain; flattered his self-esteem by enumerating the many advantages under which he would commence his diplomatic career; and declared herself ready to make any personal sacrifice which might tend to his advancement; and once more Mortimer was beguiled.

Within a fortnight they were established in a first-rate hotel, having left the supine Mrs. Delamere sole mistress at Westrum; and as the London season had not yet commenced they had ample opportunity to select such a residence as they deemed suitable. Upon this point, however, considerable difficulty was experienced; the views of the husband by no means coinciding with those of the wife. In their house-hunt,—one of the most disagreeable occupations, *par parenthèse*, to which poor human beings can be subjected!—Mortimer steadily bore in mind the amount of his income, while Sybil as resolutely discarded all such considerations.

“Were we about to reside altogether in town;” was her constant argument; “or were we here

merely for purposes of pleasure, a very moderate establishment might suffice, provided always that the situation were unexceptionable; but you must not forget that you have an important purpose in view, and that an ostentatious display of economy will by no means advance your interests. The world worships wealth: there is an occult magic in riches which operates even upon the proudest and best-principled natures. I never hear a would-be-philosopher affect to deprecate the man of money without feeling a sneer at his want of candour pass over my heart, although I may banish it from my lips. No, no; trust me, Frederic, all such asseveration is false and hollow; for do we not, every day of our lives, see the affluent courted and flattered, even by those who neither require nor hope to be profited by the wealth they worship? Gold is the religion of the world. There is no shrine so thronged with devotees. In every other creed there are schisms; but Mammon knows no divisions among his votaries. Keep a close hand, and the good qualities which you may possess will be hidden with your wealth; but spread it abroad before the eyes of the crowd, and they will at once give you credit for every other virtue. When you have accomplished your purpose, you will have time enough to retrench; and, meanwhile, believe me, the more you can persuade others that the very object of your ambi-

tion is the mere caprice of a man weary of the total idleness of affluence, the more readily you will find friends to push your fortunes. One mistake at such a moment as this may be fatal to your prospects; and you are about wilfully to commit the most serious error into which you could possibly be betrayed."

What marvel that Mortimer ultimately suffered himself to be subjugated by these specious sophistries?—That an elegant residence was secured in one of the most fashionable squares; that a splendid establishment was formed; and that the equipages, jewels, and opera-box of Mrs. Mortimer, were upon a consistent scale—That the *Morning Post* duly informed its readers of all the movements of the family; that Tattersall rejoiced in the patronage of Mr. Mortimer; and that he was, through the good offices of half-a-dozen of his former friends, who hastened to welcome him to town, in a very short space of time ballotted into two of the leading clubs?

Heart-sick and homeless—for all was glare and representation in the mansion of which he had become the temporary master—Mortimer soon discovered innumerable attractions in the almost-bachelor life to which he was thus restored; while Sybil, on her side, saw with gratified vanity and ill-concealed triumph, that she was instantly recognised by half a score of her former acquaint-

ance, who were only too happy to renew what they were pleased to consider as an old friendship, as they caracolled beside her carriage in the ring, or partook of the elegant hospitality of her husband.

Thus, for a time, all went smoothly ; and as the period drew near at which Mrs. Mortimer anticipated the birth of her child, and that she was comparatively unable to plunge into the vortex of dissipation by which she was surrounded, Mortimer found his expenditure, although serious, yet still defined and regular ; and amid the pressure of amusement without, he ere long forgot his anxiety upon the subject.

Not even the habits of dissipation which he was rapidly acquiring sufficed, however, to deaden him to the delight of being a father ; and when at length his beautiful Sybil placed in his arms her lovely little girl, he felt all the better feelings of his nature swelling forth again, and made a thousand prudent resolutions for the future. But, alas for Frederic ! constitutionally unstable, he was now, moreover, under the influence of a firmer spirit than his own, and his wife had formed far different projects. Debarred for a few weeks from those dissipated and exciting pleasures which had been the business of her youth, and had become to her vain and ambitious nature almost a necessity, she had, in her temporary retirement, only grown more than ever anxious to compensate to herself for



the time that she had lost ; and accordingly she listened with a quiet smile to the sententious orations of her husband ; yawned as seldom as possible ; and satisfied herself by pursuing her own course as resolutely as though they had never been uttered.

Yet, skilful tactitian as she was, Sybil had nevertheless the mortification to perceive that her train was composed only of such of her former friends as still remained unmarried ; and that it was rarely a female guest graced her splendid home. In vain did she hint to the dangles who pressed about her that she should gladly welcome their sisters, their mothers, or their aunts. The answer was always ready. One would immediately have presented Maria, but she moved in a set of her own, and would feel herself perfectly *désorientée* if she were to venture beyond it ; another would at once have brought his mother to pay her respects to Mrs. Mortimer, but really Lady Elizabeth was such a “ quiz,” so prim, so pious, and so straightlaced, that he had not courage to subject her to such an ordeal ; for, after all, she *was* his mother, and he did not wish to peril his own popularity with his charming friend by inflicting such a penance upon her—It would be like intruding a gnome into the paradise of a peri—An actual kill-joy, to which he would not be accessary for the world ; while a third hinted the coquettish propensities of his widowed aunt, from

whom he had certain expectations, and who would never forgive him were he to place her in a position so inimical to her vanity. And thus, each excused himself with the best grace in the world as regarded his female relatives, although all were alike devoted to the charms of their hostess, and the good cheer of their host; whom they amused in his turn by assurances of their best efforts to second his diplomatic views, and professions of intimacy with ministers, secretaries of state, and influential individuals of all parties.

And Frederic, despite his new-found happiness and recent resolves, listened, and persuaded himself to have faith in all this table-talk, for he had already acquired habits of selfish indulgence which warred against his better principles, and which he was too supine to resist; while, as day after day, and opportunity after opportunity, passed over unimproved, he adopted the idea that the fortunate moment had not yet arrived, but that come it must; and therefore, lapped in luxury, and gradually suffering improvidence to sap the very foundations of that independence which was his birth-right, and upon which he had hitherto prided himself—he waited.

Nor did one reproach, or even one expostulation from Sybil, cause him to pause for an instant in his career of pleasure. She had no sooner inoculated him with a desire of self-aggrandizement than

she appeared suddenly to have lost all such ambition in her own person. The measure of her secret aspirations was now full even to overflowing; and she had no longer leisure to speculate upon the probabilities of her husband's destiny; her own was amply fulfilled; and they had ceased to have an interest in common.

Gradually she saw a few of the most fashionable women in Town gather about her; women of wealth and rank, who possessed all the advantages of life, save indeed perhaps, an unsullied reputation; and she found it easy, even amid her pride, to discredit the rumours which, from time to time, were intruded upon her on this subject.

"The world was so censorious;" she declared with a frown of virtuous indignation; "There was so much party-spirit in English society; so many petty jealousies, and idle slanders, ever ready to destroy the best and the brightest, that she would never believe that Lady Clara Flushing had been divorced from her lord from any cause more grave than an incompatibility of temper, in which he was doubtlessly as much to blame as herself; nor that Mrs. Babington had been forbidden to appear at court for any other reason than that the politics of her husband were unpalatable to the Royalties.

In the case of Mrs. Mortimer, it might indeed truly be said, that charity had, in this instance, covered a multitude of sins; but meanwhile, Lady

Clara, Mrs. Babington, è *tutti quanti*, were all handsome, highbred, and accomplished women, who gave a new grace to her drawing-room, and attracted about her all that was most distinguished of the other sex.

Constantly in a crowd, absorbed in perpetual dissipation, and more beautiful than ever, Sybil was as independent of her husband's affection as he was rapidly becoming of her own; and as she always met him with a smile whenever the accidents of a London life threw them together, that she was always well-dressed, did honour to his taste, and sedulously supported his consequence in society, he began to believe that, after all, he had perhaps no right to expect more; and that his former dreams of home-happiness and domestic bliss were a mere idle chimera.

Did he ever remember Gertrude? Who can doubt that, even amid the mad career which he was now pursuing, there were still moments when a terror of *the future* curdled at his heart, and when all would have been dark and murky, had not one faint and far-off memory, like the solitary star which occasionally pierces through the vapour of the blackest night, gleamed upon the horizon of his heart, and rested there? Yes, guilty as he was towards Gertrude—not because he had not loved her, for in that respect at least, he had been powerless; but by his cold neglect and selfish for-

getfulness; by the indolent self-indulgence which had induced him from day to day to defer those gentle courtesies of affection and kindness which were due alike to her meek attachment and her orphan state, until he had at length felt that he no longer possessed a right to recal himself to her remembrance, nor to tender a helping-hand to her necessities—guilty as he felt towards her, still her image never crossed his mind that it did not for a moment appear to purify and chasten his whole nature. And if there were times when, as he contemplated his loveless home and blighted hopes, something like a regret glanced across his perturbed spirit, who shall wonder? But he soon hastened to banish feelings and thoughts like these. His lot was cast—his destiny was accomplished—and it was idle to look back. On—on—his course must now be onward. His whole future, his whole fortune, his whole existence, hinged upon one wild hope. True, it had hitherto eluded him; but Sybil had declared that he need only ‘bide his time’ to see it realized; and this assurance had been echoed by the boon companions who sat beside his board, and were the partners of his pleasures.

And thus time wore on, until the season drew near its close, and the languor of exhaustion began to replace the mad excitement which had for the last few months characterised the leviathan city. Royalty had withdrawn to the stately towers and

terraces of Windsor; the strawberry leaves were transferred from town mansions to lordly halls and hereditary castles; men of fashion forsook their clubs, and women of *ton* ceased their cabals. The seething cauldron of high-life, which had so long bubbled even to the brim, emptied itself to the very dregs; and London was no longer habitable, save for those obscure and unimportant individuals who are compelled by their necessities to remain chained to the wheels of the vast machine, and to labour at its preservation, lest the pulsations of its mighty heart should cease to beat, and thus the pleasures and the luxuries of the great should suffer at a future day.

In one word, London was empty. Sullen *employés*, compelled by the absence of their principals to mend pens and read the daily journals in dingy offices; men of letters, unable to travel further from the head quarters of reference and research than to Brixton or Wandsworth; Guardsmen, sulkily sauntering up St. James's Street to the hollow echoes of their own footsteps, and counting the panes of glass in the well-known windows, where in gayer hours they only numbered familiar faces; novelists, closely immured in their modest lodgings, weaving, with wearied brain and aching head, new fictions to amuse the idleness of those who are to pay back gold for health, and strength, and time; the would-be fashionist of

slender means and questionable pretensions, who, after aping—as the sign-painter apes the artist—for a brief season the follies of the great, closes his doors, not to escape the heat and dust of the summer streets, but to retrench, and prepare for a fresh season of awkward imitation and uneasy display; the modest household to whom the advent and exodus of the great caravan of idleness are alike unimportant; the careful trader, jealous of every instant which may turn to future profit; and the vigorous artisan, to whom all seasons are alike, so that they bring him daily toil and daily bread;—by such as these alone were now peopled square, and street, and place, in the vast city; which was thus, for awhile, blotted out from the highly-coloured map of the civilized earth.

In short, as we have already said, London was empty; and had a second great fire, like that of 1666, supervened, not a single public journal would have found cause to enclose its closely-printed columns within a sable margin; for the disaster would have occurred when there was “nobody in town.”

The Mortimers, as a matter of course, followed the example of their associates, and retreated from London to the country; but unlike most of them, Frederic would not consent to increase the revenues of the Post Office by subjecting himself to the importunate “reminders” of a host of creditors; and accordingly satisfied every claim

which could be made upon him, before he would consent to return to Westrum. The amount of his responsibilities, as a natural consequence of the life which he had been leading, more than doubled its anticipated extent.

We are so apt to forget the by-gone superfluities which we regarded as necessities when we indulged in them, but which, like the magical blue fishes in *Vathek*, find a tongue when conjured by the potent wand of the better-remembered creditor, that the very wisest of us are apt to be bewildered at times in our arithmetic; no marvel, therefore, that Mortimer was fearfully startled by his own defective calculation. But he had little time either to regret or to resolve; for although Sybil could no longer remain in London, she had at least arranged to transfer her own immediate fraction of London to the obscure retirement of Westrum; and as the infant and its nurse had been sent forward, as well as half-a-dozen servants, to prepare the house for the reception of the expected guests; and that, moreover, Lady Clara was too timid to travel so far alone, and consequently accompanied her dear friend, Mrs. Mortimer, in her own chariot, while the master of Westrum made his way back to his ancestral home by the mail, attended by his confidential servant; he had neither leisure nor opportunity to impress upon Sybil the vital importance of retrenchment.



## CHAPTER IV.

SYBIL did the honours of her house to perfection; and although such a crowd of fashionables had never since its erection been collected beneath that roof, every one was soon perfectly at home except its master. The summer was brilliant; and the grounds, thanks to the previsions of their mistress, were in full beauty. Not one natural facility had remained unimproved; and as the gardener had been transferred from The Grange, and the less skilful functionary who had grown grey in the family, had been compelled to cede his place to this more scientific florist, marvels had been wrought which astonished, even if they did not altogether gratify, her husband.

Nor was the change within the mansion less striking than that without; but although even the beloved library in which Mortimer had been accustomed to spend so great a portion of his time in studious and delightful solitude, was invaded at all hours, he felt the futility of remonstrance; and was compelled to console himself by the reflection that at least its most cherished treasures were suffered to remain undisturbed, and that it was in

quest only of the ephemeral productions of the day, that the idlers, who now thronged his saloons, so continually broke in upon him with those vapid demi-apologies, which are rather an impertinence than a courtesy.

And, moreover, one source of happiness was still open to him, in whose pure enjoyment none sought to interfere; and that one was the presence and the affection of his child, who already received him with eager cries of joy and outstretched arms, whenever he approached the remote nursery to which she had been consigned, lest her baby-griefs should occasionally prove too audible for high-bred nerves.

And what a treasure was that infant girl to Mortimer! Her smiles were the Lethe in which he plunged all his bitter memories, and for a while forgot them. As her dimpled arms wound themselves about his neck, and her soft and peachy cheek rested upon his own, he for an instant believed himself to be happy. For hours would he wander about the grounds, with the delighted child and her attendant nurse, watching with anxious joy all those mysterious dawnings of intellect which are perceptible only to the eye of a parent; and endeavouring to strengthen the still unconscious affection which she betrayed towards him.

And he was enabled to do this freely, and almost without comment, for the brilliant circle of his

wife were for the most part alike careless and regardless of his movements; while Sybil herself, who was provided with an admirable *souffre-douleur* in the person of her mother, was quite as willing as her guests to dispense with the presence of her husband.

All Westrum was in amazement. The main street of the little town was alive with equipages and horsemen. Provident milliners secured the "last London fashions" from the transient glimpses which they obtained of the fashionable dames as they were whirled along; the breathless postmaster was no longer the emporium of news and gossip, for the duties of his office occupied every hour of his time; the stalwart carrier, who had long, from prudential motives, remained a bachelor, hastened to claim his promised bride on the strength of his influx of business; and emulous shopkeepers ventured on luxurious innovations hitherto unattempted.

Nor, while such was the sensation produced among the traders, did the gentry of Westrum remain uninterested spectators of the progress of events at the great house. All such as from local position and old custom were privileged to pay their respects there, hastened to enforce that privilege; and even Mortimer himself was satisfied with the courtesy of their reception. The smile of Sybil was as winning, her words as bland, to the prosy rector, and the senten-

tious physician, as to those of her own set. He, in the honesty of his nature, did not understand the necessity, of which his wife was fully conscious, of conciliating all the visitable population of the neighbourhood in order to render them available whenever it might be expedient. He forgot that the court-cards are at times useless without the remainder of the pack; and that it is by shuffling them together that the just value of each is elicited in the great game of life; but the more far-sighted Sybil did not suffer so obvious a fact to escape her.

While Lady Clara could criticize alike the cap and the curtsy of worthy Mrs. Collins, she could afford to spare her own friends; nor was it less desirable to veil, by a drapery of muslin petticoats, the occasional *tête-à-têtes* in which pretty little Mrs. Babington delighted to indulge on a particular settee behind the grand piano.

Let it not be supposed, however, that the honour of visiting at the great house was gratuitously purchased, for such was far from being the case. During the lifetime of its former gentle and unpretending mistress no moral dais had been raised; no one was compelled to feel that he or she must take their places below the salt; but under the reign of Sybil all was changed. It was doubtlessly pleasant enough for the physician's comely wife, and the rector's goodnatured daughters, to comment on the morrow to their admiring and jealous friends

upon the courtly society with which they had so lately mingled; but it is nevertheless certain that all of them were aware how little they had, in point of fact, formed an integral portion of the brilliant circle to which they had been admitted; and where they had rather been grouped in order to enhance the graces of the principal personages upon the stage, as the *coryphées* of the opera form a living back-ground to the Taglionis and the Ceritos; and to fill up the occasional pauses of weariness which necessarily ensue in all struggles of display, than received upon equal terms. Who could venture a second time to address a peer's daughter, who vouchsafed no reply beyond a look of wonder at the presumption; or to tender any courtesy to a coquette whose soul was in her flounces?

And yet the worthy people bore all this, and returned again; and again and affected not to perceive that they were merely the pawns upon Mrs. Mortimer's chess-board, in order that they might revenge their own mortification upon the dear friends against whom the portal of this earthly paradise was closed.

Those among my readers who have never done the like, can afford to laugh at their infatuation; but some there will be who cannot claim the privilege of mirth upon such a subject, for this species of moral meanness is not confined to Westrum;

and which among us does not find some familiar name trembling upon his tongue, which would prove the degrading fact?

Among the guests of Sybil was a certain Mrs. Lamerly, who was, for some unexplained, and it might be inexplicable, reason, more obnoxious to Mortimer than any other of his lady-visitors. Assuredly it was not from wounded vanity that he disliked her; for, if any of the guests occasionally condescended to remember that Westrum House had a master, it was pretty, languishing Mrs. Lamerly; who by some accident had more than once encountered him in his walks, and had even caressed his child. Mrs. Lamerly—as she assured him with a sigh, and a down-dropping of the lids which veiled a pair of large and lustrous blue eyes as dark as amethysts—doated upon children; and had it pleased Providence to make her a mother, she was afraid that she should have suffered that one affection to absorb her whole existence. What could be so pure, so beautiful, so holy, as the tie which linked a mother to her child? Did not Mr. Mortimer agree with her that all other tenderness was poor and puerile in comparison? Truly did he in his very heart of hearts; although he only smiled vacantly in reply, as he drew his laughing girl closer to his bosom.

Mrs. Lamerly had, indeed, touched the right chord, but she had done it unskilfully, and it only

jarred where it should have soothed. Mortimer disliked this woman. She had been one of the early friends of Sybil, and one of the most eager to renew their acquaintance. She had eloped when very young with the dissipated scion of a noble house, whom his friends, weary of perpetually repairing the effects of his improvidence, at length sent into honourable exile as *attaché* at one of the petty German courts; where he was ultimately interred with all honour, leaving his young and pretty widow penniless. He had, indeed, made an appeal to his family in her behalf a short time before his death, but it had been made in vain, none knew wherefore; while it was not the less certain that the lady continued for a couple of years to inhabit the same city, frequent the same court, and maintain the same appearance, by some occult faculty known only to herself.

At length, however, the *maladie du pays* declared itself, and she returned to England followed by the regrets of the Margrave, and the compliments of the whole court circle; as languid and as languishing as ever, with a comfortable although somewhat mysterious income, and a magnificent diamond bracelet.

We have said that Mortimer greatly disliked the diplomatist's widow—Could it be prescience? He never asked himself the question; he only felt that even her blandishments were distasteful

to him. And yet Mrs. Lamerly was a general favourite in her set: she simpered out her inanities with such a low sweet drawl; she told such piquant stories of Herr Graf Such an one, and the Gräfine So and so, without appearing to be at all aware of the somewhat startling point of her own anecdotes; she sang such deliciously wild and guttural Sclavonic ballads almost with a lisp; she was so original, so odd, and so entertaining, and she had such fine eyes; that it would have been matter of wonder that she still remained Mrs. Lamerly, had she not lingered so long at that petty German court.

But if, even for Sybil, there was still a mystery attached to her friend, it was by no means reciprocal as regarded herself; for the simple, smiling, and apparently unsuspecting little widow was well aware of every incident in the career of her brilliant hostess; and as she looked around her, and contrasted the opulence by which Mrs. Mortimer was surrounded with her own comparatively confined resources; and then, with her usual well-concealed shrewdness, discovered the vacillation of her husband's character, she began to ask herself how long such a discrepancy need exist, were he to be exposed to fascinations of a different description, and that she were to exert her own peculiar powers of pleasing.

There was something very agreeable to her



vanity in such a speculation; and although, in the first instance, it had been a mere idle fancy, the offspring of indolence and an inordinate love of luxury, the thought recurred again and again, until it piqued her self-esteem into a desire to prove whether, indeed, her foreign graces could not accomplish such a revolution. She had no fear of robbing Mortimer of the heart of Sybil, for she had read that heart to its very core, and she knew the "perilous stuff" of which it was composed; while, as regarded Frederic himself, she had not been a week beneath his roof before she discovered that all his affection was now centered in his child, and that his passion for his wife was rapidly degenerating into the most encouraging indifference.

Mrs. Lamerly was a coquette by nature; and consequently she did not pause to ask herself what might be the actual result of her machinations to either party; neither were her principles of that rigid order which would have taught her to pause upon the threshold of so base a treachery as that which she was thus coolly meditating; she only remembered that she was weary of inaction; that, after having for a time seen herself an object of exclusive adoration, she had since degenerated into a mere unit in the great sum total of society. She only remarked that Mortimer was by many degrees the handsomest man of their set; and

never doubting that she could also render him the most agreeable, she determined at any rate to try her strength, if it were only *pour passer le temps*; and therefore it was that she contrived to waylay him in his walks, and that she conceived so flattering an affection for his child.

All this is very hideous; but it was nevertheless a natural consequence of the culpable carelessness with which he had suffered his wife to surround herself by associates of equivocal reputation, and to make his home the rendezvous of idle *roués* and fashionable demireps.

Mortimer believed himself to be as susceptible and sensitive as ever to all which touched his honour; but his principles had in reality become unconsciously enervated by constant contact with profligacy and folly; and if he still discouraged the loose jests of the dissolute, and the social vices of the lax, it was rather because they were repugnant to his taste, than that they alarmed his virtue.

Still, Mrs. Lamerly vainly lavished upon him all her fascinations, all her pensive sighs, her languid smiles, her bewitching nonsense. He never bestowed more than a passing glance upon the fairy foot that scarcely seemed to press the velvet cushion by which it was supported; kept his eyes riveted upon the daily journal, while her magnificent arm, circled by its brilliant brace-

let, rested like a snow-wreath upon the chords of the harp; talked politics with old Sir John Stickfast, the greatest proser in the Lower House, while she was lisping forth some Germanic scandal, and transferred the slippers which she professed to have embroidered expressly for him, to his valet.

Mrs. Lamerly was nevertheless not discouraged. She had yet a great card to play; and although her vanity would have been gratified could she have been indebted for her triumph solely to the spell of her own attractions, still her spirit of emulation was aroused, and she resolved not to be baffled.

There was a strong bond between herself and Sybil. Ostensibly it was that of old affection and happy memories, of renewed friendship and perfect confidence; but in reality, it was one of mutual apprehension. Sybil was well aware that many of the secrets of her past life were in the keeping of her former friend, who was as conscious as herself of the necessity of their concealment from her husband; while the widow, on her side, long habituated to all the luxuries of existence, to many of which her present income was inadequate, too well appreciated the advantages to be derived from even a temporary home like that of Mrs. Mortimer to cast them from her lightly.

It was in consequence of this conviction that

she still for a while compelled herself to temporise; but although she succeeded in teaching the beautiful infant to clap its little hands and crow at her approach, permitted it to tear her costly veil of Brussels point without betraying the slightest irritation, and even induced it to leave its father's arms to nestle in her own, still that father remained cold; and she was at length driven to confess to herself that her childish graces were expended upon him in vain.

Languid and listless as it pleased her to appear, Mrs. Lamerly possessed strong passions, and a perseverance in all she undertook to accomplish which amounted to obstinacy. No wonder, then, that mortified vanity in this instance aroused all the darker impulses of her nature. Had he even loved Sybil, she could have understood this resolute indifference on the part of Mortimer; but her self-esteem had not even this poor consolation.

For the first time she felt the impotence of her efforts, and a spirit of revenge took possession of her. It was in vain that Lord James Blenheim and the Honourable Theodore Bruce whispered their honied words in her ear, smoothed the satin cushions of her *fautouil*, and hung entranced upon her lisping accents. She smiled upon each in turn, it is true; but she estimated their adoration

at its just value. She knew that in a crowded country-house all must find amusement for themselves; and that idleness cared little whence that amusement was derived, whether from a pet monkey or a fantastic beauty; that Lord James was an engaged man, and the Honourable Theodore a ruined gamester. Still, the incense of flattery was essential to her; and so she discouraged neither, although each was but as a floating straw upon the current of a stream wherein she had resolved to dive deep for a more coveted treasure.

At length her patience was exhausted; and she resolved to incur any risk rather than fail in her purpose. Like all sentimental women, she indulged in an elaborate correspondence. No letter-bag ever arrived at Westrum which did not contain half a dozen closely-written epistles to the address of Mrs. Lamerly; and it was curious to see the indolent and impassive beauty seated at her desk, in her turn rapidly covering sheet after sheet of delicately tinted vellum—for the odious and vulgar fashion of coloured paper, mystic devices, and emblematic wafers, was at that period just beginning to obtain in England—with the most minute characters, and to watch the facility with which the crow-quill poured forth its stream of soundless words.

Mrs. Lamerly protested that she hated writing,

and perhaps she did ; but there was sound diplomacy in her perseverance. Her position was uncertain and insecure ; she could not afford to lose a friend ; and it was, moreover, necessary that she should be constantly informed of the movements of those who might, directly or indirectly, exercise an influence over her fortunes. Thus no occurrence took place in her set, and it was an extensive one, of which she was not immediately made cognisant ; and this fact not only enabled her to enhance her popularity by a constant supply of that light and often malicious gossipry so welcome at all times to the idle and frivolous, but also to facilitate such plans as she occasionally found it convenient to devise.

It is wonderful how often a placid and simple exterior deceives the crowd. The old and trite proverb, that "still water runs deep," is full of sound philosophy. Those laughing, rattling, reckless persons, who utter without reflection all that rises to their lips, may work mischief alike for themselves and for others, but the wound is at least laid open, and there is no hidden canker to apprehend ; while the blow which bruises rather than breaks, lingers longer in the flesh, and at times corrodes even to the bone, poisoning the stream of life, and inducing the fatal gangrene which can never be eradicated.

Mrs. Lamerly, even while lisping out her German ballads, discussing the merits of a morning-cap ; reading half-a-dozen pages of a French novel ; flirting with Lord James and the Honourable Theodore ; quizzing Sir John Stickfast with a pretty smile which almost turned the brain of the bachelor politician, old as he was ; waylaying Mortimer in his walks ; and dressing a doll for the baby, had mentally completed her project ; and it was worthy of her. In one way or the other, as she triumphantly reflected, it *must* tell ; and who could say but it might succeed in both ?

Mortimer was too proud to place himself in competition with the foplings by whom his wife was surrounded, and thus he left them a free field in which to display their arts of fascination ; but would he do so were he pitted against a more formidable opponent ? Would he not awaken to a full sense of his danger if he once saw her the object of adoration to a man with whom he could only doubtingly compare himself ? And, in this case, would he not need a friend, a counsellor ? A slight and gratulatory flush rose to her cheek as she glanced around her. Where could he so fitly seek that friend as in herself ? Had she not already knit between them the bond of his child's affection, which, appear to disregard it as he might, she felt well assured must nevertheless have, in some degree, produced its effect ?

It was clear that he despised Lady Clara, and that he barely tolerated Mrs. Babington; and she was well aware that let proud man commune as he may with his own sex in his hours of pleasure, it is to the sympathy of woman that he turns in his season of doubt and trial.

What fervent passions have sprung from a far weaker cause! The haughty spirit, once humbled to seek for help and consolation in the eyes and on the lips of a pretty and designing woman, seldom recovers heart-whole from the moral prostration. Like the silly lamb, he leaves some portion of his fleece upon the brambles; and it was upon this contingency that Mrs. Lamerly cleverly calculated. And meanwhile, what might be the effect of her design on Sybil? A curve of scorn rose to her lip, and trembled there for an instant. Let Sybil look to herself; her honour was in her own keeping. Her honour! How subtle are the distinctions made by the world on the subject of female honour.

The widow laughed in her sleeve; bitterly perhaps, but still she laughed. Mrs. Mortimer was *blasée*, it is true; had been the jest of half London for a season; had jilted the man to whom she was affianced; had volunteered elopement with another under very precarious circumstances; and had finally enriched herself with the spoils of her first dupe; but still she was an honourable



woman, married to an honourable man, who would consider it incumbent upon him to send a bullet through the heart of any one bold enough to assail her reputation ; while she herself—there needed no demon-whisper in her ear to urge her on ; but it came ; close, mocking, and baneful as the blast of the simoom ; and the little heart which a career of vice and folly had spared to her, parched and withered beneath the scorching breath of jealousy and mortification.

## CHAPTER V.

"SYBIL;" said Mrs. Lamerly in her most insinuating tone, as they stood together arranging some exotic plants in a *jardinidre*, as female taste only *can* arrange them; "I have *such* a favour to ask of you."

"What is it?" demanded her companion in reply, moving a few paces backward as she spoke, in order to ascertain the effect of her last grouping; "I trust not to sanction your sending for your blue macaw; you know that my mother's nerves cannot sustain its screams; so, do pray be rational, and not urge it again."

"I was not even thinking of Jacko, poor dear;" pouted the simple beauty; "though you know how I miss him; but tell me if I did ask you to admit another pet, who never screams, and who could not disturb Mrs. Delamere, or anybody else; would you refuse?"

"That depends entirely upon the nature of your playing."

The little widow indulged in a peal of rich and ringing laughter, which sounded like the very echo of a joyous heart; as, smoothing her glossy ringlets

before a mirror, and drawing closer the *cordillère* of her pink satin *douillette*, she said with an arch look: "You must, in such an establishment as yours, still have one bachelor's room available."

"And if so, Amabel?"

"Why then I would ask you to allow me to supply it with an occupant."

"I must first know whom you would introduce."

"No one to whom you at least will object, *Madame la Châtelaine*;" said the widow with a peculiar expression; "unless, indeed, like many of our monopolising sex, you will neither take nor give."

"Speak plainly, Amabel, if you would be answered."

"I will speak plainly;" said Mrs. Lamerly, with a sudden change of voice and manner; "Trevor is just returned to England. All Mortimer as you are, you cannot have forgotten Trevor, Sybil? We met abroad, and time, as you are aware, works wonders: you were married; and—in short," lisped out the lady, bashfully inclining her head towards her left shoulder, until her long light curls rested upon the glowing satin; "I have reason to suppose that I almost succeeded in consoling him."

"You!" involuntarily exclaimed her listener, as, with burning cheek and flashing eyes, she glanced towards the little doll-like figure beside

her. "You succeeded in consoling him! Am I to understand that he loves you?"

"You are to draw your own conclusions when we meet;" tranquilly replied the widow, as she rearranged a cape-jessamine; "thus much, however, I will tell you, that I was the depository of his regrets and his despair—that I it was who played the Desdemona to your jealous Othello; and that while I was very near loving him

‘For the (gauntlet) he had run,’

I have sufficient grounds for believing that

‘He did love me, that I did pity him.’

"Am I to understand, Amabel;" asked Mrs. Mortimer, suddenly becoming pale as the blossom of the arum near which she stood; "that Sir Horace Trevor made you his confidante?"

"That is a searching question, Sybil;" was the smiling retort; "but I will be frank, and answer at once ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ To tell you the truth, I heard as little as I could; for I hate men to entertain me by talking of other women when they should be thinking only of myself. You loved him, he said; or at least he loved you, and you were to be married, and all that sort of thing; not as I was to poor Augustus, but surrounded by all the proprieties—parsons, and proctors, and postilions in scarlet jackets—when suddenly you jilted him. Yes, I am afraid, Sybil, that, in order to be quite

fair and open with you, I must confess that he said you—had—jilted him. Naughty girl! who could not be satisfied with any thing short of a prince; and, silly woman! who having made up her mind to catch her bird, was not careful to lime the twig thickly enough.”

“And was this all he told you?” again asked Sybil, with difficulty controlling her emotion, whose very excess enabled her to despise the taunt of her companion; “Did he tell you no more than this?”

“It may be that he did;” said the widow, listlessly throwing herself upon a sofa; “but you know of old, Sybil, that I am a bad listener; and my memory has become *so* defective since I lost poor dear Augustus, that I really remember very little that has happened to me since.”

“Listen to me, nevertheless, Amabel;” said her companion with compressed and bloodless lips; “You may succeed in deceiving others, but *I know you*. We were girls together, and your baby caprices cannot beguile me. What is your intention, what your view, in bringing Trevor here? Do not lose sight of the fact that I may have less interest than yourself in forgetting the past.”

“I have already told you;” was the sullen reply; “I believe that Trevor admires me—and—I am poor.”

“I understand;” said Mrs. Mortimer, with a

contempt which she did not even seek to conceal; "but I doubt that my husband will consent to receive such a guest. Even before our marriage Trevor was distasteful to him."

"Perhaps so;" was the careless reply; "He feared a rival, but of course that danger is now past; and if you represent the matter to him in its true light, I cannot see what valid objection he could raise."

"And yet you have been a wife," Amabel."

"I have; and therefore I have not now to learn that these things are easily arranged. Besides, Sybil, Mortimer can only rejoice in the opportunity of displaying his triumph to your discarded lover."

The words were common-place enough, but there was something in the tone in which they were uttered which jarred alike upon the pride and upon the fears of Mrs. Mortimer. The war of wits was equal; and there needed no magician to prove to Sybil that her dear friend held her in the toils. It cost her much to temporise, and gladly would she have spurned her as she sat, but she dared not; and accordingly she forced a smile, and throwing herself down beside her, said in a tone which she struggled to render playful—

"Come, now, Amabel, be true for once; and tell me if you indeed anticipate that you shall one day be Lady Trevor."

"If Horace can really forget you I am sure I shall."

"Then are you not throwing away your best chance by asking him here—*here*, where we shall be brought into close and constant contact? Mark me, Amabel, I do not believe for an instant that you have any thing to fear from my influence, but you know that men are wayward, and surely it would be more judicious—"

"To give him time to forget me altogether.—Is that what you would say, Sybil? I give you all due credit for your humility; and I will so far put faith in it as to tell you that I feel quite satisfied you will not exert your influence to my detriment; while, as a natural consequence, Trevor will henceforward consider you only as the wife of his friend, and therefore beyond his reach. Thus, you see that I have nothing to apprehend."

"Amabel, would you only be honest and straightforward for five minutes—"

Mrs. Lamerly laughed; not scornfully or satirically, but as though she really thought the dialogue in which she was engaged very amusing.

"Will you at least hear me?"

"Of course. Do you not perceive that I am listening with all my ears, and that I am vastly entertained to discover that Sybil married has as great a confidence in the effect of her charms as she had in her first girlhood? Why, my dear, my

vanity has aged tenfold more than your own; and it is as much as I dare venture to expose my *preux chevalier* to the captivations of so accomplished a coquette, even now, when she is hedged round with the proprieties of married life. But, Sybil;" she added with affected solemnity, as she shook her head, while her chestnut tresses shimmered in the sunlight; "I know all the onerous obligations of matrimony, and all the rigid duties which it involves. You may believe me; for although I was barely seventeen when I married Augustus, I discovered a gray hair above my right temple before I had been a wife more than a week, and almost suspected a wrinkle one short month afterwards. Judge, therefore, if I can enter into your feelings."

"I have done;" said Sybil indignantly; "and although I cannot be discourteous enough to weary of an invited guest, I must decline receiving one who is forced upon me." And she rose from the sofa.

"As you please;" retorted her companion. "I am then at liberty to tell Trevor that you do not feel authorized to run the risk of seeing him here?"

"Amabel;" said Sybil, as she paused before her; "I do not understand you. I can incur no risk from contact with your lover."

"Then why are you so unaccommodating?"

"I have already told you that he is distasteful to Frederic."



"Why, so are fifty other things. He hates Lady Clara, and snubs Lord John; and yet here they are. He detests a house full of flirts and fools; and you will admit that if you are good-natured enough to make room for Trevor, he will be the most rational man, and I the most rational woman, under your roof. You may as well concede at once that *il caro marito* has very little to do with the matter."

"If I were only convinced that Sir Horace really intended to make you his wife;" said Sybil doubtingly; "all my objections would at once be overcome; but, Amabel, Trevor is a man of the world; and he knew you abroad."

"He did so;" replied Mrs. Lamerly with the most provoking *à plomb*; "and in like manner, Mr. Mortimer is a man of fortune and family, and yet, Sybil, he is your husband. Do not let us taunt each other, love. There are some ugly proverbs which might be brought to bear upon us both. In one word, will you receive Trevor *as my friend*, or not?"

Mrs. Mortimer stood for a moment irresolute; all her habitual self-possession had forsaken her; and it was in an ill-assured voice that she at length said: "You are ungenerous, Amabel; but I can deny you nothing. Only, if I consent to admit Trevor here, you must promise to keep a secret for me; a poor and puerile one, it is true, but still it must be kept."

"And you will confide it to me?" exclaimed Mrs. Lamerly with a genuine joy, which she strove to conceal under an affectation of childish eagerness."

"I have no alternative, or perhaps I should hesitate to do so; replied Sybil with haughty bitterness; "but this it is: before my marriage with Mr. Mortimer, Sir Horace visited The Grange in order to—to renew his suit——"

A low and almost inaudible laugh broke from the parted lips of her listener; but she was too much excited to remark it.

"Conscious of the jealous temperament of Frederic;" pursued Sybil; "and aware that our previous engagement had authorized, in Trevor's eyes at least, a familiarity of manner which my captious suitor would never tolerate; and, in fact, driven to some such expedient by the circumstance of his having come upon us when Horace had raised my hand to his lips——"

"Fie, naughty Horace!" broke in the exulting widow, affecting to hide her eyes in her jewelled hands; "But was that all?"

"ALL, Mrs. Lamerly!" said Sybil sternly; "and that *all*, simple as it was, would have sufficed to estrange from me for ever the hand, if not the heart, of Mr. Mortimer, had I not, upon the impulse of the moment, presented the stranger to him as my cousin."

"Enviably presence of mind!" said the widow, with a smile which partook rather of contempt than admiration. "How the dear old Margrave would have enjoyed such a *tour de force*! Really, my dear Sybil, you are inimitable! And what said your simple Corydon to his new connexion?"

"He bore with him for my sake; and that is all that I can expect, should he again be compelled to receive him as a guest."

"Poor Horace! However, I will endeavour to compensate to him for the slights of the happy mortal who won you from him. And so I may tell him to come—may I not? And you will welcome him for my sake, for he is at present quite *désorienté*; only a week from Italy, where he saw your old friend Saviatti, who told him that he had seen you; and all about poor Signor Mortimer being as jealous as an ogre; and that wretched little Lord Squanderleigh being shot in a duel by that dear handsome Florentine Duca, who was kicked out of a *salon* in Paris for cheating at *écarté*; and a host of other things that you will be delighted to hear. And I will promise to be generous, and to lend him to you until he has emptied his budget: after which *gare le loup*, for I am a little demon when I am thwarted in what the French prettily call 'affairs of the heart.'"

And so the two friends parted.

## CHAPTER VI.

"FALSE pride, my pretty Gertrude; nothing but false pride;" said Mr. Armstrong gaily, as the orphan stood, steeped in blushes, and with large tears swelling in her eyes, in the deep bay of a library window, where she looked in the midst of the heavy dark frame-work of carved oak like one of Guido's angels; "Surely, when I give you my son, I may also be allowed to offer you a few flounces and furbelows!"

"But, indeed, my dear sir! ——"

"But, indeed, my dear young lady, I must have my way! Mary has set her heart upon it; and I will not consent that there shall be the difference of a knot of ribbon between you. Do you not hear her every now and then whispering, 'Papa, I should like so and so?' or, 'Papa, I *must* have such a thing?'—And are you not both my daughters?—I can have no more folly of this kind, Gertrude. Had you been wealthy, I must, I know, have allowed you to be as headstrong as the rest of your sex; but, as it is, I will not hear another word."

"And yet, for that very reason, dear Mr. Arm-

strong, I must entreat of you to let me speak. Do you know that even now—now, at this very instant—when you are not only endeavouring to hasten my marriage with your son—I, a poor, penniless orphan, who can only repay your generosity by the gratitude of a true heart, and the tribute of a sincere affection—but are even urging me to share the luxuries which, although they may be the birthright of Mary, are all too costly for a portionless bride like myself—do you know, that even now—” and, as she continued speaking, she had gradually approached the old gentleman, until at last she was leaning over his high-backed chair, her arm upon his shoulder, and her golden hair mingling with the grey and glistening locks which clustered over his benevolent-looking head; “even now, I feel as though all this happiness must be a dream; and I start at every sudden noise lest I should awake only to find myself once more alone and unloved.”

“Silly child!” said the old man, in a voice that trembled somewhat more than usual, as he drew her towards him, and pressed his lips to her glowing cheek.

“Suffer me, therefore, I implore you, to return to my humble home until the period of—of this double marriage. I have already, in my selfish happiness, too much neglected the benevolent relative to whom I am indebted for all that I

possess, and all that I am taught to hope. Let me for three short weeks endeavour to prove that the joy of my heart does not extinguish its affection."

"What you ask is only fair, Gertrude, if you really wish it;" said Mr. Armstrong reluctantly; "but I very much doubt if either Ernest or his mother will consent to such a sacrifice. As for me, I confess that, between man and man, (if I may use such an expression where an old woman is concerned,) I think you are right."

"I knew you would, sir; for you are always alike just and generous; and therefore I may now calculate upon your support upon this point, for which I am really anxious. But I have not yet done; and even in spite of your own disclaimers, I do not, I will not despair, that you will still make another and a greater concession, when I entreat it almost upon my knees. Oh, bear with me for an instant! And indeed, indeed, you will admit that I only ask what is reasonable and consistent! Reflect for a moment! Your daughter is about to marry a man of large fortune, and carries with her to the altar a dowry worthy of him; while I ——"

"Gertrude, again I say that this is false pride; and, moreover, surely something is due alike to Ernest and to his family?"

"Much—very much, Nevertheless, I fearlessly

persist in my petition:— leave me free until I am indeed *his* wife and *your* daughter. Do not compel me to feel utterly powerless.”

“ Poor Mary ! Why will you persist in thwarting her ? ”

“ Mary will hear reason ; I know she will ; and I shall be so much happier. Moreover, my dear sir, poor as I am, I still possess resources which I can explain to dear Mrs. Armstrong and the girls ; although I should shrink from detailing them to one of your lordly sex.”

“ Well, well ; I have not the heart to contradict you any longer ; ” said the squire ; “ so, if you can convince the women, I will not interfere further in the matter ; but, I warn you, that they are likely to prove less ductile in your hands than I have done.”

Enchanted by her success, Gertrude warmly thanked the affectionate old man, and hastened to the breakfast-room, where the ladies of the family were busily discussing the merits of Lyons satins, Lisle laces, and orange-blossoms. A general exclamation greeted her entrance. Mary's taste was at issue with that of the London dress-maker, to whom Mrs. Armstrong bowed with implicit confidence ; and it had just been decided that the question should be referred to Miss Mortimer.

“ Now, am I not right, dear Gertrude ? ” eagerly asked the other bride-elect ; “ will not our dresses

be infinitely more graceful if entirely composed of lace, than if we merely trim them, and leave the glossy glarish satin unsubdued? And shall you not prefer a long veil of this delicious point to an odious bonnet?"

"The lace robe and the veil by all means, love;" replied Gertrude, with a quiet smile; "like you, I shrink from the glare of satin by sun-light; but, unlike you, I shall neither venture upon the one nor the other."

"What can you mean?" exclaimed both sisters with surprise; "Has it not been already arranged that the two dresses are to be precisely similar?"

"It *was* so arranged, I know;" said Gertrude, as she raised the hand of Mrs. Armstrong to her lips; "and grateful, very grateful do I feel for the affection which could prompt such a proposal; but, within the last half-hour, I have induced Mr. Armstrong to rescind his resolution."

"How very unkind of papa!" said Mary, with a pretty pout. "Our party will not look half so picturesque; and that is not the worst of it, for I know you so well, Gertrude, that I am quite sure of your motive for this silly whim. But, mark me, I will not stand at the altar with you if you are dressed one whit worse than myself."

The orphan laughed, as she silenced the threat with a sisterly kiss. "Do not fear, dear girl;" she said quietly: "You have as yet no idea of my



heaped-up riches; and, moreover, I warn you that I shall pride myself more upon my dress that day, than were it composed of lace like cobwebs, or thrice-piled velvet."

"What is it then, Gertrude?" inquired Mrs. Armstrong anxiously.

"It is the work of my own hands, my dear madam. Simple, very simple in its materials, but rendered somewhat costly by the labour which has been bestowed upon it. Let us, however, rather talk of dear Mary's toilette."

"Ernest will be bitterly disappointed when he finds that you have overthrown our plans, Gertrude;" said Eleanor reproachfully.

"And so am I;" observed the old lady, as she raised her eyes for a moment from one of those atrocities which, in the shape of illustrations to Magazines of Fashion, Belle Assemblées, and productions of that class, libel at once the good taste of Englishwomen, and the fair proportions of nature. "Only look here, Gertrude, at this sweet costume! I had made up my mind to persuade you both to fix upon this; and now, you see, you have upset everything."

"I am afraid that you will, indeed, be inclined to think so, my dear madam," replied the orphan, after glancing for a moment at the great human hour-glass, overwhelmed with conflicting finery, which Mrs. Armstrong submitted to her inspection,

“when I tell you that this is not the only concession which I have induced your kind husband to make. A certain feeling of remorse has reminded me that I owe a debt of gratitude and courtesy to my aunt; and that I cannot better pay it than by devoting to her comfort and amusement the three brief weeks which still remain before——”

“Oh! no! no! Gertrude. Impossible!” was the general exclamation. “Ernest will never consent; and, moreover, only consider that, should you persist, there is an end at once to all our consultations, all our plans. Miss Warrington cannot want you; and will only be annoyed by the perpetual intrusion to which such an arrangement would subject her. No! no! We will yield the first point, if you will give up the second.”

“Indeed, I cannot;” said the orphan, smiling through her tears; “I cannot, because I feel that I am doing right; and you will see that I shall soon induce Ernest to think as I do. Remember, also, how soon we shall have a right to be constantly together, without sacrificing any sense of duty; and let us not wilfully rush upon so needless a source of regret.”

“As Mr. Armstrong has consented;” said the old lady, laying down the beflounced beauty which had so long been her study; “as your father has consented to this arrangement, my dears, I think that Gertrude is quite right: for, after all, her

poor old aunt must miss her even more than we do ; and so, if she can persuade Ernest to allow it, I must desire that you will not say another word upon the subject."

And Gertrude did succeed, although with considerable difficulty, in convincing her lover ; after having been compelled to hear him utter certain comments upon old women which were anything but complimentary ; and their last evening at the Manor House was considerably saddened by the consciousness that they should not, for some time to come, again enjoy that solitary communion in which they had latterly indulged.

" Nevertheless, rebel as you are ; " said Ernest with a smile ; " I will indulge you with one more evening saunter through the grounds : so, throw on your bonnet and shawl, and we will stroll until the dews force us in again."

And then it was, as they wandered through the rich shrubberies, and seated themselves, for a time, in the pavilion so dear to both, that the orphan, for the last time, poured forth all the feelings of her pure heart to the man who was so soon to become her husband ; and listened, with a happy smile, to the rebuke with which he met her earnestly expressed regrets that she should bring him no better dowry than her love.

" I ask, I care for nothing more, Gertrude ; " he replied, in an accent which carried conviction to

her mind. "In possessing you, I shall possess all that I have ever coveted on earth; but when once you are mine, I shall become more ambitious for your sake. Nor do I doubt that by exerting proper means, I shall succeed in leaving you no such cause of regret. I have already a project; and had you been less unselfish than you are, or could I have made up my mind as demurely as you have done, to a temporary separation, I might already have taken some steps towards its accomplishment. However, as you have decided upon returning home where I shall have no chance of seeing you except in the presence of your female jailor—Confound all old maiden aunts!—I am half-inclined to start for town in a day or two. You can write to me by every post; and I will endeavour to satisfy myself in that way until I ascertain what may be my chance of success. But after all, Gertrude, this new caprice of yours is too bad. Look at Mary: she has never tried Somerville as you are trying me; and I warn you, lady mine, that this is the last occasion, the very last, in which I shall submit to your odious despotism."

Gertrude answered by an affectionate smile.

"How you women love to tyrannize;" pursued Ernest. "Meek and mild as you seem, you are all alike."

"Except Mary;" laughed his listener.

"Not even excepting Mary," retorted her lover.

"She is only deferring her impertinence till she can cover it by the dignified authority of a wife; but you have not had the grace to do this."

"And your project, dear Ernest?"

"Is a secret, fair lady, at present; but I will nevertheless be generous enough to confide to you one of its earliest results, should it prove successful. You remember that lovely little retreat which we drove past a few days ago, Gertrude, half cottage and half villa, with its dainty pleasure-grounds and miniature lake? I covet that smiling abode as our home. But I have said nothing on the subject to my father,—who would, as I well know, strain every nerve to gratify me while it remains in the market,—for Mary's portion must be paid, and I am aware that he could not, without inconvenience, meet so large a demand upon his means at this particular moment: so that all I can do is to trust that it will not find a purchaser until I am prepared to make it mine."

"And had I not been penniless you might at once have accomplished your wish," said Gertrude sadly.

"Now, fie upon you!" exclaimed Ernest; "thus to steal my secret from me, and then to repay me by outraging the delicacy of my affection. One more such regret, Gertrude, and I shall begin to fear that you have not a proper confidence in my love."

“Rather, then, will I be grateful for the poverty which has left you without one doubt ;” replied the happy girl, as she wiped away the tears which had started to her eyes ; “and henceforward I will speak and act as though I were a rich heiress, and privileged to indulge in every species of extravagance. Will that promise satisfy your exacting nature ?”

But often, very often, when she found herself once more domesticated beneath the narrow roof of her aunt, did the conversation of that evening recur to her, and never without a pang. Of Ernest’s affection she was assured ; nor did she fear that even poverty could weaken it ; but still she wept over the sacrifices to which he had compelled himself for her sake, and bitterly felt her utter helplessness to lessen them. She was indeed about to give herself to him, a portionless bride, for even the bequest of her aunt she no longer felt to be her own ; and it had already been arranged by Ernest that it should be transferred to Miss Warrington, as a tribute of gratitude for the kindness which she had shown to the orphan in her hour of need.

Thus, however cheerfully Gertrude might seem to bear the humiliating fact of her poverty, still it revolted her delicacy, and pained her heart. She could not quite forget the resolute refusal with which Mr. Armstrong had in the first instance met the entreaties of his son ; and although he had

subsequently treated her with paternal kindness, still the mortification of that refusal had left its sting. It was in vain she repeated to herself that all this waste of feeling, situated as she then was, had become worse than idle; still a thousand memories rose up before her, each coupled with its own regret. She was, indeed, an outcast. Even her cousin, the companion of her childhood, had forsaken her—and she was about to enter the home of Mr. Armstrong, as a waif which his generous son had rescued from the cold, wide ocean of the world; without a home, without a friend, and almost without a name.

It was fortunate for Gertrude, that the daily letters of her happy and sanguine lover, overflowing as they were with affection and gladness, and the occupation with which they necessarily provided her, tended to rouse her mind from the morbid state into which it might otherwise have fallen; while the half-playful and half-serious reproaches of his sisters, who found it difficult to forgive her desertion at such a moment, assisted in no slight degree to reconcile her to herself. They declared that every thing had gone wrong since she left the Manor-house; that they could come to no decision upon any point without her assistance; and they even endeavoured to enlist Miss Warrington in their cause. The rigid old lady, however, proved impracticable; and laid so much

stress upon the propriety of her niece remaining under her roof until the very eve of her marriage, that they rather lost ground than gained it; and were compelled once more to submit.

Thus a week passed by, during which Miss Warrington was more erect and sententious than ever. Not a rumour had transpired in the neighbourhood, of the great event which was about to occur. Not even the grey-haired curate had a suspicion of the double wedding; although he had already been apprised that his church was to be honoured by the presence of the Archdeacon, who, being an intimate friend of the Squire, had been invited to perform the ceremony for his daughter; and thus, although the gossips were busy chronicling every movement between the Great House and the humble abode of Miss Warrington, and found ample food for their conjectures, not only in the perpetual transits of the ladies themselves, but even the comings and goings of grooms and waiting-maids, they naturally attributed all this delightful commotion to the approaching marriage of Miss Armstrong; and marvelled that as the proud niece of their neighbour appeared so essential to "the squire's people," she should have chosen such a moment to return home.

On the tenth morning after her return to Bletchley, two letters instead of one were, to the surprise of Gertrude, put into her hand. For a moment, her



heart beat quickly—It must be from Frederic, and after all, she was not quite forgotten. But no; a single glance sufficed; the writing was not his, and the mysterious missive bore the London post-mark. She had a faint idea that she recognised the somewhat quaint and crabbed characters of the superscription, but she could not identify them; and in another instant she laid the letter down, merely marvelling who could have written to her, and soon altogether forgetting the circumstance as she greedily devoured the contents of Ernest's far more interesting epistle.

Even the letter of a lover, however, comes to an end at last; and Gertrude had no sooner for the second time arrived at the conclusion of the three closely-written pages which composed that of Ernest, than she once more remembered the still unopened packet upon the table.

These were its contents.

“DEAR NIECE,—

“MY physician informed me yesterday that I am dying; and I felt so perfectly satisfied that he was right that I at once dismissed him, as it is useless to throw money away which is certain to be lost, both principal and interest. I am aware that the fact of an old man's death can be of little consequence to you; and therefore it is only as the brother of your mother that I now

write to tell you, that after having lived for so many years alone, I am weak enough to desire not to die alone. I have no relation upon earth but you, or I would not have troubled you upon such an occasion. I enclose a 5*l.* note. If you consent to come to me, it will pay the expenses of your journey; and if you do not, you may keep it to buy a black gown, if you think proper to wear one when I am gone, out of respect to your mother's memory. If you *do* come, you must come at once, or you may be too late. I give you the address of my late office; when you reach town, drive there, and they will send a clerk with you to my house, as you might not be able to find it.

“Your uncle and well-wisher,

“WILLIAM SPENCER.”

The agitation of Gertrude was excessive, as she rapidly perused the letter of her obdurate relative; but not for a single instant did she hesitate as to the line of conduct she should pursue. She had not, moreover, a moment to lose; the coach by which she had formerly reached Bletchley only made its London-ward journey twice within the week, and was to leave that very day at noon. Hurriedly, therefore, she detailed to Miss Warrington the emergency in which she found herself; and after writing a brief note of regret and ex-

planation to the ladies of the Manor-house, hastily threw together a few indispensable articles of apparel ; and, aided by the energy of Hannah, found herself at eleven o'clock traversing the well-known meadows, accompanied by a stout lad bearing her portmanteau and carpet-bag, precisely as she had done on the previous occasion.

Yes ; thus alone and unattended, save by a fustian-clad village boy, did the future mistress of the Manor-house set forth upon her second melancholy journey, leaving behind her smiling lips and loving hearts, to encounter at best a very uncertain welcome, and to assist once more at the melancholy spectacle of a death-bed. She reached the roadside inn, paid the modest fee of her impromptu page, and then in a large, bleak, chilly room, whose sanded floor, rude chairs, empty grate, and beer-stained table, combined to form the very acme of discomfort, sat down to await the departure of the coach, and for the first time to reflect.

Her thoughts naturally turned on the probable displeasure of Ernest, when he should learn not only the fact, but also the manner of her departure ; she felt that his pride would be wounded, and his fears excited by her solitary pilgrimage ; but still she did not repent the step which she had taken. The brother of her mother, however harshly he might have acted towards her, had a claim upon her respect and obedience, which she dared not

neglect; and even amid her terror of the present, and her dread of the future, she experienced something akin to joy as she remembered that she had still one relative by whom she was not utterly cast off, and to whom she might even yet prove a source of consolation and comfort.

At length, after much preparatory bustle, the dragging of trunks and packages along the stone passages, the loud laughter and louder oaths of a score of idlers and hangers-on, and the shrill voices of women calling to each other, as it appeared to the trembling Gertrude, from every quarter of the building, the horses were at length put to; and, to her great delight, she found herself, on entering the coach, in the presence of a single fellow-traveller, a comely woman of sixty; who, after having uttered a courteous and respectful "good-day" to her new companion, attempted no further conversation, and thus once more left the anxious girl to her own thoughts.

## CHAPTER VII.

NEVERTHELESS the journey was a dreary one, and well calculated to oppress the already saddened heart of Gertrude. Nothing could be more dispiriting than the constant intrusion of strangers, who, after a coarse stare, and a surly greeting, were anxious only for their own accommodation, and careless of the discomfort of those with whom they were brought into temporary contact; the sudden stoppages, accompanied by hurried departures; and the discordant rumbling of heavy trunks overhead, or the still more annoying searches for small parcels, mislaid in some of the numerous pockets dispersed in the interior of the vehicle; the succession of repugnant fumes of food and strong potations, rendered still more inodorous by the closeness of the carriage, and the selfishness of its occupants, who, having fortified themselves against the external air, saw fit, moreover, to insist upon its entire exclusion; the dreary waiting at the doors of road-side houses, where the other passengers descended to make their hurried repasts, for the sole purpose, as it appeared, of subsequently grumbling over their inferiority; and, ultimately, the arrival in town,

and in the heart of the city, in the midst of a twilight deepened by fog, and rendered still more terrifying to a novice like Gertrude by the noise of many voices and the tread of many feet.

A hackney-coach was, however, soon procured ; and ere long the orphan, with her slender luggage, was on her way to the office to which she had been directed by the letter of her uncle. Hitherto she had borne up bravely ; but this last slow and melancholy, and to her mysterious progress, through narrow streets, where the dim lamps failed to throw more than a sickly beam upon the dirt-obscurd, and often iron-barred windows of the lofty and frowning houses, totally exhausted her courage ; a thousand fantastic doubts and terrors took possession of her ; she was utterly alone, in the power of a stranger, of whose probity she had necessarily no assurance ; and as she looked eagerly from the window of the foul and rumbling machine in which she was borne along, she could not obtain the most remote idea of the streets she traversed ; all were alike, long, and dingy, and dark, without one distinguishing feature which could be discerned through the thick and uncertain gloom.

Nor was her situation apparently much improved when, at length, the cumbrous coach drew up beside the narrow pavement of what appeared to be a squalid lane, and the immense mass of capes and handkerchiefs which enveloped the

driver appeared beside her, and his hoarse voice inquired if that were the right house. Gertrude trembled in every limb as she declared her utter ignorance upon the subject, and requested that he would inquire of the inmates. The man turned away with a surly and inaudible rejoinder, but he nevertheless obeyed; and, at his summons, the door was opened by a slip-shod woman, whose uncombed hair fell in revolting confusion about her face, and who held in her hand an unsnuffed candle, which flared and guttered under the action of the chill wind.

The heart of the orphan sank within her as she felt convinced that this could not be the haven she had sought; and, for an instant, she was crushed by the conviction of her forlorn and helpless situation, thus utterly alone in the streets of a great city, amid damp and darkness; but she was soon relieved from this new terror by the approach of the slatternly portress; who, advancing to the side of the carriage, dropped a curtsy, and inquired if Miss would be pleased to alight, adding, that she had just come in time, as Mr. Jackson had already locked all up, and was preparing to go home.

"No, no, I thank you;" was the quick rejoinder of Gertrude; "I have not a moment to lose. If it be, as I suppose, Mr. Jackson who is to be good enough to accompany me to my uncle's, have the

kindness to tell him that I am ready to proceed at once."

The woman withdrew into the house; and, at the termination of a few minutes, she reappeared, accompanied by a diminutive man, of careworn and haggard countenance, who, as he emerged from the dingy passage, was hastily buttoning a shabby and insufficient great-coat over a huge bunch of keys. By the light of the flaring candle he accosted Gertrude with a courtesy which was almost obsequious; and, on her reiterating her wish to avoid all further delay, made a quiet bow, and mounted the box beside the coachman.

The poor girl was entirely ignorant whither she was now proceeding, and she had ample opportunity to reflect upon the discomforts of her position ere they arrived in a narrow street at Walworth, which was their place of destination. Here they once more stopped; and the active clerk having hastily descended from his unenviable eminence, and cautiously knocked at the door, announced to Gertrude that she had now reached her uncle's house.

It had by this time become so dark that, owing to the absence of street lamps, which, as it appeared, were a luxury entirely dispensed with in that immediate neighbourhood, the excited and wearied traveller could form no judgment as to the description of residence selected by her uncle;



but she did not long remain in doubt; for once more a door was opened to her, and again a female stood upon the threshold, candle in hand, to inquire her business. To this question Mr. Jackson immediately replied in a low, and somewhat deferential tone; after which, he himself opened the coach-door, took possession of the portmanteau and carpet-bag, which he was compelled to deposit in a front room, in order that the young lady might be enabled to pass into the house; and then, while the neat and matronly person who had given them entrance was respectfully ushering her into the same apartment, he advanced, hat in hand, to inquire if he should discharge the coach. Totally unaccustomed to all such arrangements, Gertrude eagerly and thankfully put her purse into his hand; and, while she was making hurried and whispered inquiries as to the state of her uncle, she was once more startled by the sound of a fierce contention without.

“Don’t be alarmed, Ma’am;” said the good woman with a smile, as, even by the faint light which she carried she saw the cheek of the orphan turn pale; “It is only Mr. Jackson settling with the Jarvey. They are such rogues, that he has been trying to cheat you, as a matter of course, but for once he has met with his match: he must look sharper than ever he did in his life before, if he imposes on Mr. Jackson.”

"Oh, I entreat you, give him anything—all that he asks.—That outcry will disturb Mr. Spencer."

"Oh, no, Ma'am;" was the quiet rejoinder; "I don't think my master will hear it; but if he does, it will do him good. He will be so glad to know that you have not thrown away your money."

The heart of the orphan sank within her; she knew not how to reply to such an assurance; and involuntarily she glanced round the squalid room in which she stood, as if to read in its arrangements some token of its owner's habits. The survey was soon completed. Fire there was none; and the discoloured shavings which filled the grate afforded ready evidence that they had long remained undisturbed; a small and well-worn carpet partially covered the floor; and half a dozen rush-seated chairs assisted in concealing the remaining portion of the boards; a small round table, furnished with an office ink-stand, a few pens, and a torn blotting-book, stood in the centre; and the walls boasted, for all ornament, a folio sheet-almanack fastened to the faded paper by four pins, immediately above the chimney-piece.

Gertrude had already been initiated into the discomforts of genteel penury; but on her arrival at Bletchley she had believed that the home of Miss Warrington was an extreme example of its

class; while now she had only to look round her to be convinced, that even by her last change of residence, she had left, not merely positive comfort, but almost luxury behind her.

In an instant the conviction flashed upon her mind, that the helpless old man who had so unexpectedly summoned her to his bed of death had been ruined by one of those hazardous speculations in which he had formerly amassed considerable wealth; and the question trembled upon her tongue, when it was arrested by the re-entrance of Mr. Jackson, upon whose hollow cheek the excitement of his late contention had almost brought a flush; and who smiled a smile of genuine complacency as he restored the purse of Miss Mortimer, assuring her that he had succeeded so thoroughly, that the rascally coachman had not carried off a farthing more than his fare. It was evident, by his crest-fallen look, as Gertrude answered only by a silent bend of the head, that he had anticipated both thanks and congratulations upon his victory; but he once more became radiant as she placed the last remaining guinea of Mr. Spencer's gift in his hand; and assured him, in her gentlest accents, that she would not fail to inform her uncle how greatly she was indebted to his care.

How difficult it is for those who have once enjoyed affluence, even though it may have been succeeded by comparative penury, and those

gnawing doubts and apprehensions which occasionally accompany the disbursement of a crown-piece, to forget their early habits, where they feel that they have incurred obligation! and thus it was as Miss Mortimer of Westrum House, rather than as the niece of Miss Warrington, that Gertrude recompensed the services of the astonished old man, who had been her guide through the mysterious wilderness of London. Never, however, was largesse better bestowed; and could the gentle girl have guessed with what a feeling of astonished happiness that poor office drudge trudged homeward to his obscure lodging, to gladden the eyes of his sickly wife and ill-clad children by the sight of that golden coin, she would have shed tears of delight. When he took his leave, the female attendant, after apologizing to her new inmate for leaving her in the dark for a few instants, as 'she had no other candle, bolted and barred the door of the house as carefully as though it had closed over the entrance of the jewel-cave of Aladdin; and then, hastily returning, deposited the light upon the table, and, at the request of Gertrude, went to inform the sick man of her arrival.

Again the orphan looked around her in utter sadness. It must be as she had guessed; and the rich relative who had abandoned his family because he could not endure to share his wealth with them,

had lived to see it melt away into absolute penury, and perhaps to die amid privation and regret. And then another thought flashed upon her. Miss Warrington as yet knew nothing of the generous intentions of Ernest in her behalf; and, consequently, she should commit no injustice if she proposed to him to divide Mrs. Mortimer's bequest between her aunt and the equally needy brother of her mother. It was little, as she sorrowfully felt, to offer to either; and thus divided, became even less worthy of their acceptance; but it was her all, and it would suffice to convince them that she was not selfishly indifferent to their welfare.

Feeling more happy than she had done since she left Bletchley, Gertrude rose from her seat, and was disencumbering herself of her heavy travelling cloak, when the servant reappeared, and offered to conduct her to the chamber of her uncle, who was prepared to see her.

Overcome by fatigue and anxiety, the orphan felt her knees tremble as she preceded the woman up a narrow and uncarpeted flight of stairs, and then paused beside a door which stood partially open.

"Walk in, Ma'am, if you please;" was whispered in her ear; "that's master's room."

And Gertrude obeyed.

The same solitary candle by which she had been received on her arrival still lent its friendly light; which, faint though it was, enabled her to discover

every detail of the closet-like apartment of the dying man. One of those odious inventions called fire-baskets stood in the grate, where a feeble flame was flickering beneath a suffocating clump of coke; a table of unpainted deal was drawn near the hearth with a chair beside it, and upon it stood a spoutless jug and a glass tumbler. A large hair trunk, which had evidently long afforded a banquet to the moths, supplied the place of drawers; and a comfortless tent-bedstead, with curtains so scanty that they refused to meet on either side, occupied the upper end of the room, and partially obscured the window.

Upon this squalid bed lay the worshipper of Mammon, beneath a thin and sullied coverlet; one hand under his head, which was only protected from the chill night air by a profusion of snow-white hair which fell over the pillow, and the other resting upon a walking-cane, that had evidently been left purposely within his reach.

"So you are come, are you?" growled a voice which would have been harsh had not weakness rendered it feeble, as Gertrude moved noiselessly across the floor: "Thank you for that at least." And the bony fingers quitted for an instant the head of the cane, and were extended to her as she reached the bed-side: "Come to see me die—not in a palace—not in a palace, as perhaps you ex-

pected ; but like an honest man, under a quiet roof, never disturbed by debts or duns."

"Do not despair, Sir;" said Gertrude softly ; "You require care, and I am very grateful to you for having given me the opportunity of becoming your nurse. Young as I am, I am no stranger to a sick room."

"All the better—all the better;" was the ungracious rejoinder : "No woman has a right to be so. But sit down, sit down ; why do you stand?"

Gertrude possessed herself of the solitary chair, and placed it near the sick man's pillow.

"And you, Mrs. Sharp;" continued the invalid in the same low growl ; "go and arrange Miss Mortimer's room. Have you borrowed a bolster, as I told you?"

"Yes, sir;" replied the woman with a slight blush.

"Very well, go then ; take the candle with you. We can talk as well in the dark."

Mrs. Sharp curtseyed in silence, took up the brass candlestick, and disappeared. Gertrude remained in darkness with her scarce seen, and dreaded relative.

"And now tell me—tell me;" whispered the sick man, when they were thus alone together ; "Tell me, niece, what has your journey cost you?"

"Your generosity, sir, more than supplied my wants."

"Yes, yes ; you could not spend five pounds in

coming here, unless you sowed silver by the roadside, that it might bring forth gold. London was the trial, child ; London, I know it. I have lived in London, boy and man for sixty years ; and now and then they have tried to cheat me. *Tried*—do you mark me?—tried, but never succeeded!” And through the darkness sounded a low chuckle, as the sick man turned his head abruptly upon the pillow. “ I protected you against the tricks of London, when I put you under the care of Jackson—Jackson is as keen as a file, but has never had wit enough to make his fortune. He was too weak to grapple with the world, and to hold what he had clutched. It requires wit—ay, and wisdom too—when a man has once become rich to enable him to remain so, and not suffer his honest gains to escape him ;” and full of the image which he had conjured up, the wretched mammon-lover raised his bony arm in the air, and unclosing his clenched hand, spread wide his attenuated fingers, as though a shower of gold-dust were evaporating from between them.

The poor girl shrank before this sudden burst of factitious energy, although its most hideous feature was spared to her by the obscurity around them ; and anxious to evade all reply to such an observation, she said timidly,—

“ You were speaking of Mr. Jackson, sir.”

“ True ;” was the prompt reply, as her uncle



once more relapsed into sudden calm: "It is idle to talk to you of what you cannot understand. I was talking of Jackson; telling you that he had been a fool, who never knew how to avail himself of his natural capabilities. But, by the bye—what's your name, child? I have forgotten."

"Gertrude, sir;" said the poor girl, almost choked by her tears.

"Ah, yes, Gertrude, I remember now: your mother was fond of novel-reading, and found the name there, no doubt; but no matter. I say, Gertrude, you did not give Jackson anything, I hope? He's in constant employment; sixty pounds a-year, and only four children. With proper management, sixty pounds a-year will go a great way: and when there are no appearances to keep up—and what appearance can be expected from the junior clerk of a mercantile house?—it is a very comfortable income."

Gertrude made no reply.

"And so Mrs. Mortimer left you 2,000*l.*, child?" pursued the sinking gold-worshipper; "2000*l.*!! Do you know that millions have been made out of the fiftieth part of 2,000*l.*? And what have you done with such a sum of money?"

"Will you forgive me, my dear Sir, if I venture to tell you what I should rejoice in doing with a part of it?"

"Oh, then, it is not all gone!" said the eager voice, as the bony fingers again expanded themselves, and sought in darkness for the hand of Gertrude, which they clasped in their skeleton pressure; "Then it is not all gone! And I may live long enough to get you good interest for it; unquestionable security; you may trust me. But be saving, Gertrude; be saving. 'Take care of the pence, and the pounds will take care of themselves, as poor Richard says.' But what do you want to do with part of it, child? What can you know about money-matters? What nonsense have you got into your silly woman's head?"

"I scarcely know how to tell you, Sir; but I had better confess that when I received your letter I believed you to be living in affluence, if not in splendour."

"I dare be sworn you did!" growled out the harsh voice, and the clasp of the withered hand was suddenly withdrawn.

"That idea alone," pursued the orphan undismayed by the effect of her frank confession; "made me hesitate for a moment in obeying your summons; for I felt that where you could command every comfort and every care, my presence would avail but little; while there were circumstances which rendered me anxious not to abandon my home at this particular crisis. Now, however, I am indeed grateful that I stifled the

voice of my selfishness; for since I entered your house I feel that I may not be utterly useless; that I may be enabled to act towards you the part of a child: and that, with your permission, I may in a slight, although unfortunately a very slight degree, repair the injustice of that fortune which I am painfully aware has deserted you, at the very moment when its favours were the most needed."

"And what can you give me, should I live?" murmured the dying man, even more huskily than he had yet spoken.

"Little, too little, I fear, to secure to you all the comforts of existence;" replied Gertrude sadly; "but still enough to protect you from want."

"And what do you propose to live upon yourself?"

The orphan blushed, although all was dark about her. "I should, perhaps, already have explained to you, my dear Sir;" she almost whispered; "that I am about to become a wife."

"The wife of whom, Gertrude Mortimer?" loudly demanded the sick man, aroused into violent although transitory energy: "Beware how you suffer yourself to forget, that although an almost penniless orphan, you are the daughter of my sister."

"I do not shrink before the warning;" was the proud reply: "I am betrothed to the only son of Mr. Armstrong of Bletchley House."

Although Gertrude could not see the action, she could hear the dry and fevered palms of the invalid clasp together, and something like a laugh mingle with the hard and labouring cough which ploughed his chest.

“And so;” he said at length; “You can help me to live? and I have toiled for years only to be indebted at last to a puny and love-sick girl, who is ignorant of the value of what she gives up so readily! But I am glad that you are to marry an Armstrong, child; very glad. I know their history—part of it is written in bonds and post-obits,—but better days are coming for the Armstrongs, better days; and again I say that I am glad of it. Gold is like the loadstone, girl; only it acts and reacts upon itself. Did you ever see a jewelled dowager seat herself at a card-table, that all the gold did not fly to her ringed fingers, from those of the poor and proud adversary who had dared to breast her in the cunning strife? Did you ever see the great speculator pitted against the trembling novice in some fourth-rate venture, that the leviathan did not swallow the gudgeon? No, no; gold loves gold, child. The sight of it is pleasant; the ring of it is sonorous; the weight of it is satisfactory: the man who has once possessed gold, good, sterling gold, knows its real value, and cannot be cheated by a counterfeit. To him it is food and fuel, home, and wife, and children, costly

raiment, and proud station. If you could raise again the walls and palaces of Tyre and Sidon, and Carthage and Palmyra, do you know what all their stones would cry aloud in honour of their resurrection? Nothing but Gold." And the dying man sank back, panting and exhausted, upon his pillow.

Gertrude felt very wretched. Here lay beside her a worshipper of Mammon, evidently excluded from the sordid temple of his cherished deity at the eleventh hour; and yet so fearfully imbued with the one and only idolatry of a long life, that he could not divest himself of his old, and now worse than idle associations.

## CHAPTER VIII.

"AND now tell me, child;" pursued the wretched man after a pause; "Have you brought money enough with you to take you home when all is over here? You had better go back at once when I am gone; for London is a sad place, a very sad place, fit only for those who do not know the value of what they squander. Are you provided with money to take you back?"

"I am, Sir;" said Gertrude, more and more saddened by the conviction that her uncle could converse upon no other than his one darling theme: "and, indeed, I blush to have already intruded so greatly upon your generosity."

"That is right;" replied the gold-worshipper, evidently much relieved by the assurance; "And now, while we are alone, let me tell you at once that here, in a pocket-book under my pillow, you will find a 20*l.* note. That is to bury me, child. A sad waste of money, when, after all, we need only a few planks nailed together, and a deep hole dug to hide us away in; but we all have our weaknesses, and I wish to be put into the ground like a gentleman. So it must *all* be spent; do

you hear me, Gertrude? ALL—that I may have the satisfaction of knowing that the thing was done handsomely. Jackson will follow me, and it will be a fine day's work for him; the scarf, and hatband, and gloves, will be a little fortune, for I know well from experience that they can be turned to good account. He will have earned them, however; for I have given directions that he shall come here and arrange everything. I cannot depend on you; they would rob and cheat you on all hands; while Jackson knows the world, and trusts it as little as I do. Nevertheless, make him show you the account. Twenty pounds is a large sum to expend at once, and a great deal ought to be done with it."

"I will endeavour to follow all your directions, Sir; but would it not also be prudent to make some arrangements in contemplation of a happier result to your illness than you appear to anticipate? These gloomy forebodings can only tend to aggravate your sufferings."

"Gloomy forebodings!" echoed the old man in a tone of sarcastic indignation; "Who has told you that I have any gloomy forebodings? Do you suppose that I am afraid to die?"

"I sincerely trust not, Sir."

"Well, then, you may be at ease upon that point. Afraid to die! Pshaw! the very idea is sickening. What have I left to live for? Are you

not aware that I have been compelled to give up business; and that I am indebted, even for the services of Jackson, to the courtesy of my successor?"

"I had indeed suspected, on my arrival here, that such was probably the case."

"You are a shrewd observer it seems, girl; and yet you fancy that I am afraid to die. What is the world to me now, when I have nothing left to do in it? However, if I should live, it appears that you have provided for my wants;" and again the exulting chuckle was faintly audible; "but never fear, never fear; all is nearly over with me, and I shall not burden you long."

"You do me injustice, Sir, if you suppose ——"

"I suppose nothing, child; I am a man of facts—honest, straightforward, plain facts. My whole life has been one fact—one dry, hard fact—one palpable and tangible principle."

"I was only about to assure you, Sir ——"

"You had already done better, girl, you had offered me money, which will go farther than all the assurances in the world; and I hate sentiment."

Fortunately for Gertrude the staid attendant of her uncle entered as he ceased speaking, and thus obviated the necessity of any reply. After having carefully deposited her candle upon the table, she knelt down, and with a piece of stout iron-wire



attempted to stir into something like a blaze the dull and cheerless handful of fuel in the wretched fireplace; but, even cautious as she was, the noise grated upon the ear of the sick man; who, drawing aside the miserable apology for a curtain which veiled the head of his bed, exclaimed eagerly,—

“Gently, Mrs. Sharp, gently. How often have I told you that coals are the precious jewels of the people? It is by no means cold; by no means cold;” he repeated, as he withdrew his arm under the scanty coverlid when the chill air of the little chamber fell upon it; “and coals are dear, very dear, this winter.”

“It is the nasty coke, Sir, that will not catch;” said the housekeeper in a tone of respectful remonstrance.

“All the better, Mrs. Sharp, all the better;” was the tart rejoinder. “Half the fires that take place in London are occasioned by that injudicious use of the poker which appears to be an epidemic with your sex. Let the coke alone; it crackles and burns away gently, and nothing more is necessary. And now, what have you to give Miss Mortimer? She may, perhaps, be hungry after her journey.”

“We have a cold mutton-chop in the house, Sir.”

“Good, good; nothing is so wholesome as mutton; and cold meat after fatigue is always

preferable to hot. Go and sup, child; and then let me see you again."

"I thank you, my dear Sir;" said the unhappy Gertrude; "but I have no appetite."

"All the better;" said the sick man with a smile; "all the better. Meat is heavy at night, and might spoil your rest. Do as you please, my dear; do as you please. Mrs. Sharp will obey your orders. And now give me some water, Mrs. Sharp, I am thirsty."

"Water, Sir!" exclaimed Gertrude earnestly; "Surely you will not run the risk of drinking water in your present weak state!"

The miserable invalid made no reply until the quiet matron had poured a glass of water from the dilapidated jug, and placed it in his hand; then, after having swallowed a portion of its contents, he said ironically; "And why should I not drink water? Is it not the natural beverage bestowed upon us by nature? Beer is privileged poison; tea is costly; and I have a pump in my yard, child, for which I have already paid a tax. Why should I not drink water?"

"I would entreat for myself, however, a cup of tea;" said Gertrude, who could no longer repress her tears; "for I begin to feel that I am utterly exhausted."

"Do you hear, Mrs. Sharp?" asked the sick man peevishly. "Miss Mortimer wishes for tea;

and, as that is the case, you may bring me some also ; but coffee is cheaper, coffee is cheaper."

" Coffee will be equally acceptable to me, my dear Sir ;" gasped Gertrude.

" Mrs. Sharp ! Mrs. Sharp !" almost screamed the wretched sufferer from his squalid bed ; for the delighted attendant had hurried from the room, carrying off with her once more the solitary candle, and had already reached the head of the stairs ; " Miss Mortimer will take coffee. Measure it carefully ; for should I get well again (and there is no knowing what may occur) I shall not overlook any waste. Miss Mortimer will take coffee ; and, perhaps, some bread and butter."

The female functionary replied by the conventional " Very well, Sir," and rapidly descended the stairs ; while the orphan, once more alone in the darkness with her unhappy relative, instead of pursuing the conversation, sat and retraced in her mind's eye every feature of the sharp thin face which lay upon the pillow beside her.

One glance had sufficed to show that in his youth Mr. Spencer must have been strikingly handsome. The outline of his features was regular and fine, although now pinched and meagre from disease, and she was almost tempted to add—from famine. A hectic circle burnt and glowed upon his cheek ; but his forehead was as white as marble, his eyes encircled by a dark ring, and his narrow lips

parched and livid. The expression of his eye was half cunning and half suspicious, and betrayed a nature which his silence might otherwise have concealed; while the continued clutching of his fingers, fastening as it seemed upon some visionary treasure, and the continued restlessness visible in his whole person, told that the spirit within was ill at ease.

Not a vestige of that beautiful placidity and inward peace which make age so venerable and so attaching, drew the heart of the spectator to Mr. Spencer, even in his suffering. The sympathy which he had recklessly cast from him during the course of a long life could not be awakened by the still stern and eager selfishness predominant in every word and look; and even while Gertrude anxiously endeavoured to cheat herself into the belief that she should in time feel for him the affection due to so near a relative, she was nevertheless conscious of a sentiment of repulsion which she could not overcome.

The silence was soon broken by the sick man, to whom a moment's quiet appeared burdensome; but it was evident that he was greatly weakened by the exertion of the past hour.

"You will soon have some amusement, child;" he said, as he turned his head heavily towards her; "The paper will be here in a short time; I cannot live without a paper, and I get it cheap from a

neighbour by waiting till the evening. All I shall ask you to read to me is the city article ; I care nothing about politics, or Old Bailey reports. The money market is the only market worth watching ; and when you have read that, you can follow your own fancy as to the rest. But you must be quick : for they call for it again in half-an-hour. I made that arrangement with them," he added, dropping his voice still lower, until it sunk into a confidential whisper ; "to prevent Mrs. Sharp from sitting up to read, and burning the candle to waste ; for Mrs. Sharp has had an education, and used to bring books and read while she sat by my bedside. Books, indeed ! when she might have been repairing my linen, or washing my clothes. I soon sent the books out of the house ;" and the wretched man laughed once more his low, bitter, and heartless laugh.

The coffee was soon afterwards announced ; and, at the bidding of her uncle, Gertrude rose and followed the servant down stairs, once more leaving him in the darkness, and alone. She was miserable ; but she feared to betray all the bitterness of her feelings before a stranger and a menial ; and consequently she repressed her tears, and seated herself at the tea-table with one of those forced smiles which are infinitely more painful to witness than any burst of grief.

Comfortless indeed was the meal prepared for

the wearied and exhausted girl; but she eagerly accepted the steaming coffee which was offered to her, and even endeavoured to compel herself to partake of the uninviting bread which was its accompaniment. This last effort proved, however, beyond her strength; and a thick sob arrested the unpalatable morsel ere she could swallow it.

“Let it come, Ma’am; let it come;” said the sympathising woman who stood beside her; “It will do you good to cry; and well you may, poor lady. Do not try to stop your tears, you will be better able to bear up afterwards; and I shall be no restraint upon you, for I am going to take my master his cup of coffee. I must water it a little first, however;” continued the worthy Mrs. Sharp, as if speaking to herself; “or the poor gentleman will fancy that he is going to the workhouse;” and taking the kettle from the hob on which she had placed it, although there was no fire in the grate, she half filled it with water, and then adding the coffee, disappeared steadily in the darkness, as if long habit had rendered her independent of such a consideration.

And when she was once more alone Gertrude wept indeed. For a time the smiling future which was beckoning her on, was utterly forgotten, and she lived only in the cheerless present. She cared not for the poverty of her uncle; she would not have shrunk from any privations; but his narrow

and sordid spirit crushed her to the very earth. Not a vestige of that becoming pride and moral independence which would so well have graced his adversity, and recalled the habits and feelings of former days, appeared to have survived his pecuniary ruin; he had evidently sunk with his fortunes, and still clung, with a childish pertinacity, to the wealth that he had lost.

The orphan felt her fearful responsibility; she felt how much and solemnly it behoved her to awaken him to a better and a more befitting state of mind; but she could not conceal from herself all the difficulty of her task. How was she to enforce the necessity of a higher and a holier worship—the worship of humility and self-abnegation—upon one who, like the epileptic maniac, saw everything tinged with the yellow hue of gold? And yet the effort must be made. She must not suffer him, because he had lost his all in this world, blindly to put from him the promises of the world to come; and therefore humbly, and with a deep sense of her own incapacity, she resolved to make an attempt to inspire him with higher and holier hopes.

Poor Gertrude! She had yet to learn that avarice is in itself a religion; and that when once it has fixed its fiery clutch upon the human heart, that heart is evermore preyed upon by the one demon-flame; and the fearful tragedy of the fabled

Hall of Eblis is perpetually enacted upon earth. The idol may indeed be consumed upon its shrine; but the infatuated worshipper will still kneel before the empty altar, and pour out his orisons to the memory of the vanished deity.

It was not long ere the attendant returned; and the orphan having wiped away her tears, felt the presence of a fellow-being almost a relief. She, moreover, had some misgivings as to the remaining pecuniary resources of her uncle, which it was expedient either to confirm or to remove, in order that she might know how to act; and accordingly she determined to question the staid-looking woman who so quietly and resignedly served him, and thus to ascertain, if possible, the exact position of his affairs.

Having once arrived at this determination, she desired Mrs. Sharp, on her re-appearance, to reply frankly to her inquiries; a request with which the matron readily and respectfully complied.

"I believe my master to be a ruined man, Ma'am;" she said; "although not actually destitute. I am the widow of one of his late clerks, and to me he has always been just, even if not generous; but he is less so to himself; and it has been with the greatest difficulty that I have induced him to take sufficient sustenance to preserve life. He cannot last long: and yet you see the wretch-



edness in which he is content to pass the last few weeks of his existence. Before he thought of inviting you here, Ma'am, I ventured once or twice to propose to him that I should engage some young girl at low wages, to do the drudgery of the house, in order that I might devote my time exclusively to him; but he resolutely refused; and I have been compelled in consequence to leave him hour after hour alone on his sick-bed. I should not have cared so much for this, could he have rung me up when he required my services, but we have not a bell in the place; and although I substituted the cane which you must have seen near him, it has frequently happened that he has knocked upon the floor for several minutes before I heard him, and I have found him faint and exhausted from the exertion, and almost believed him for a moment to be dying."

"But tell me, Mrs. Sharp; tell me honestly;" urged the unhappy Gertrude; "this state of almost starvation in which I find you, can it indeed be necessary?"

"I really cannot say, Ma'am, but I am afraid so. As regards myself, Mr. Spencer has always paid my salary with the greatest punctuality; but I will not conceal from you, that a portion of it has almost always been spent in purchasing trifles for his comfort which I have been obliged to tell him were presents from my friends, or I do believe

that he would have died long ago of actual starvation."

The tears of Gertrude flowed afresh. "My poor uncle!" she sobbed out; "and yet he was once wealthy."

"Yes, Ma'am; and I have been even told, very rich, although he never lived like a rich man; but after the death of my husband, I saw little of him for some time, until he proposed to me that I should become his housekeeper; an offer which, as I was totally dependant on my friends, I readily accepted."

"I thank you, Mrs. Sharp, for your candour;" said the orphan; "and now, we must act in concert, and endeavour to render his remnant of life more tolerable. My own resources are scanty, it is true, but they are sufficient for the purpose. Moreover, under the circumstances, I feel it a duty to expend upon his comfort the sum which he forwarded for my journey, and which must have made a cruel inroad upon his scanty means."

"I fear it did, Ma'am, for the forwarding of that money delayed his letter for several days. He even shed tears as he folded it, declaring that should he die before you arrived, he should have ended his life by an act of folly; but now you are come, Ma'am, all will be right, and he already seems more happy in his mind."

Thus instructed, Gertrude hastened to make

sundry petty but well-judged arrangements, all tending to the comfort of the sick man, which the housekeeper gladly undertook to realise; and she was still involved in such considerations when a knock at the door summoned Mrs. Sharp to receive the paper, for which, as she remarked, her master must long have been anxiously looking out, from its unusual delay. Nor was she wrong in her conjecture, for she had scarcely returned to the parlour, when the sound of the cane upon the uncarpetted floor of Mr. Spencer's room, announced that he was aware of its arrival, and impatient for his daily luxury.

Gertrude accordingly took possession of the unsavoury journal, which, reeking with the smell of tobacco, and fouled by the touch of unwashed fingers, betrayed its tavern origin; and followed by the housekeeper with the ubiquitous candle, hastened to the sick room.

"Good girl, good girl;" said the invalid eagerly; "now come close to me, and read very slowly, slowly, that I may be able to understand you."

Gertrude was already repaid for her alacrity. The deal table was drawn nearer to the bed, and the candle placed upon it. The dying man raised himself upon the pillow, and an eager expression lighted his dim eyes for an instant. The hand which clutched the pocket-book still remained

buried beneath his head ; but the other, relaxing its hold upon the cane, wandered over the bed-clothes, and the fingers occasionally traced with wonderful rapidity the figures announced by Gertrude as she read.

“ ‘Foreign securities commanded no great attention to-day ;’ ” she commenced, carefully accentuating every syllable.

“ Just as it should be ; ” growled the listener ;  
“ ‘look at home,’ is the wisest motto.”

“ Consols began at 99, and left off at 101½.”

“ What’s that ?—What’s that ? ” asked her uncle with sudden energy.

Gertrude repeated the quotation.

“ Good, good ; ” he murmured almost inarticulately ; “ things are mending. I wish I had 100,000*l.* to sell out.”

Despite this species of running commentary, however, the orphan at length reached the termination of her dreary task ; and declining the proposal of her host that she should continue the perusal of the inodorous sheet for her own private gratification, she ventured to urge her state of fatigue, and to request permission to retire to rest.

Nothing could be more consonant with the wishes of her uncle. Gertrude once withdrawn, Mrs. Sharp might also immediately follow, and the candle be extinguished. It was therefore with

something like warmth that he bade her good night, and saw her retreat to her wretched and pillowless bed, upon which she no sooner threw herself, than, exhausted both in mind and body, she laid her head upon the *borrowed bolster*, and sank into a deep and, happily, a dreamless sleep, with the breath of prayer upon her lips.

## CHAPTER IX.

NOTHING could exceed the annoyance of Mortimer, when, as he was one morning crossing the lawn, gun in hand, preparatory to a day's shooting, he was passed by a travelling chaise and four, in which he recognised Sir Horace Trevor. Already dissatisfied with the circle which had assembled at his house, and wearied by the coquetry and frivolity of which he was a perpetual witness, he fairly lost his temper; and felt half inclined to warn the intruder from his premises. A moment's reflection sufficed, however, to show him his folly. Had he not already, by his supineness, authorized the presence of several individuals almost equally obnoxious to him? And how could he consequently decline to receive his wife's relation? Nevertheless he was irritated and annoyed: he had always hated this man; and here he was once more bearding him under his own roof. Full of angry and impatient emotions, he forgot for a moment the errand upon which he had set forth, and plunged into the shrubbery, as if to shut out at once all sight of a home which had latterly become odious to him.

Suddenly the happy laughter of his child fell upon his ear; and, like the harp of David before Saul, it sufficed to restore him to composure. It was therefore almost with a smile that he hurried on, in order to embrace his darling; and still the loud and ringing sound of her artless mirth came buoyantly upon the breeze. It was yet early; and he assuredly was ill-prepared to encounter any one save the infant and its nurse, when at an abrupt turn in the path, he saw before him Mrs. Lamerly, seated upon the grass under a sycamore, with her rich chestnut hair falling in showers about her, and his little girl busy in tangling the gleaming tresses with her fairy fingers.

Mortimer would have retreated, but the child had already heard his step, and, pausing for a moment in her sport, recognised him with a scream of delight. There was consequently no means of avoiding the encounter; and after the utterance of a brief greeting, and the expression of his surprise at finding his fair guest so early risen, he rested his gun against a tree at a little distance from the group, and threw himself down upon the turf, beside them.

Despite his dislike of the coquetish widow, Mortimer could not remain altogether insensible to the kindness which she lavished upon his heart's idol; and on the present occasion she looked so extremely

pretty amid the disorder produced by her indulgence to the child; the golden waves of her hair glimmered so brightly in the sunshine; her wrapping-gown of white muslin, designed so modestly, and yet so perfectly, the outline of her small but faultless figure; the little foot which, outstretched a few inches beyond the border of her dress, lay imbedded in a rich frame-work of mossy turf, was so exquisitely minute and well-proportioned; her fair cheek was so softly flushed by her exertions; and her large eyes were so "darkly, deeply, beautifully blue," as she looked up at him, half in confusion, and half in merriment; that he began to marvel how he could so long have remained insensible to her attractions.

"But where is Harris?" he asked, as the child, after having received and returned his caress, once more extended its little arms to its playfellow, and pursued its former amusement.

"Oh, we dispense with Mrs. Harris's attendance when we are bent upon a frolic, do we not, Eva?" lisped the ingenuous beauty, as she clasped the little girl to her breast, so suddenly as to cover the face of Mortimer for an instant with her long and perfumed tresses: "and we are not bound to tolerate even the intrusion of papa. We steal an hour in the morning before mamma or her friends have left their dressing-rooms, in order to be entirely alone; and it is too bad that our soli-



tude should be invaded by gentlemen in leather gaiters and velveteen jackets. We must select another play-ground, my pretty Eva."

"You are quite right, Mrs. Lamerly;" said Mortimer apologetically; "mine is certainly no attire in which to present myself before one of my wife's guests; but you will at once find my excuse in the fact that I could not possibly anticipate this meeting."

"Oh, you are quite forgiven;" laughed the lady, as she affected to be anxious to gather together her scattered tresses; an attempt which was, however, frustrated by an impatient cry from the child, "for it must be confessed that I am somewhat in the same predicament, and not altogether in a presentable costume. We must therefore sign a mutual truce, and promise to behave more prettily in public."

"One of us, at least, will not succeed in *looking* more prettily;" replied Mortimer, scarcely conscious of what he said, but inadvertently uttering his conviction at the moment; "and when I consider from how kind, how very kind a motive, you have suffered yourself thus to be surprised in your present picturesque state of disarray, I should be ungrateful indeed were I not to appreciate all its attractions."

"Now, fie upon you for a flatterer, Mr. Mortimer;" was the retort of the fair widow: "I shall really tell Sybil!"

"Tell Sybil!" repeated Frederic between his clenched teeth; and a sarcastic smile hovered for an instant about his mouth, which, transient as it was, did not, nevertheless, escape the quick eye of his companion. "You were one of Sybil's earliest friends, and must be quite aware that I shall be easily forgiven."

"I can scarcely agree with you;" said, or rather murmured Mrs. Lamerly, as she bent down and pressed her lips to the rosy cheek of the child, which, wearied at length with its sport, was falling to sleep upon her encircling arm; "Even knowing what I know, I cannot believe it."

"And what *do* you know?" asked Frederic abruptly.

"Oh, nothing; nothing, at least, which should bring such a scowl upon your brow. Sybil, as an unmarried woman, may have been fickle, capricious, perhaps even what the naughty, illnatured world calls a coquette; but now, of course, all that is over. The feelings of a wife are so different. Compelled to act so as to place her above all reproach, she is naturally jealous of her prerogatives."

"You are an able advocate for the unsullied purity of wives;" said Frederic, with a sarcasm which even at that moment he could not control.

"Certainly I am;" replied the lady, wholly unmoved by the tone in which the observation had

been uttered: "my good old friend the Margrave often used to tell poor Augustus that he could not be too grateful to me for all the care I took of his interests, and the sacrifices which I was always ready to make for his benefit; and although this praise was perhaps a little partial and exaggerated, still it gives me some right to suppose that I am not altogether ignorant on such a subject."

"And so my fair Sybil was somewhat of a coquette in her youth, eh, Mrs. Lamerly? To be candid with you, I had already suspected as much. A handsome woman, you know, has so many temptations to a little levity."

"To be sure she has;" readily conceded the intimate friend of the married beauty; "and then Sybil was so *very* handsome, and so much admired, that it is not to be wondered at if she *did* get herself a little talked of. For my part, I believe it is impossible for any one who is even commonly attractive to escape."

"No doubt of it;" replied Mortimer with a saturnine smile; "pretty women are the natural prey of malevolence and slander. There are degrees, however, even of scandal; and so long as nothing can be adduced against them beyond a little harmless coquetry, why, there is not much mischief done."

"True;" replied his companion, as if lost for a moment in her own reflections; "But the line to be drawn between coquetry and—and—im—

propriety, is so extremely fine—such a mere hair's breadth—that, like the bridge of El Sirat, by which the Mahommedans are to pass into heaven, it is somewhat difficult to avoid treading over on one side or the other."

"Aptly illustrated!" said Mortimer, as he swept back one of the long golden tresses of the lady, in order to possess himself of the chubby little hand of the sleeping child; a movement which brought him still closer to the side of the apparently unconscious widow; "Very ably illustrated! We should indeed be merciful to those who lose their footing, even if we cannot save them. But, to return to Sybil. You have known her many years?"

"We were girls together?"

"And you are acquainted with her cousin, Sir Horace Trevor, perhaps?"

"Oh, yes;" and Mrs. Lamerly laughed an equivocal laugh, which rang even to the depths of Mortimer's spirit.

"He loved her, I believe?"

"To be sure he did, or he would not have sought to marry her."

"I almost wonder that so handsome and fashionable a man should not have prevailed."

"For shame, Mr. Mortimer;" said the widow with a pretty display of childish indignation, as she struck his hand lightly with her slight and

ungloved fingers; "For shame, you are trying to make me tell tales out of school."

"Why should I?" asked Frederic, looking into her face with one of those smiles by which men generally retort the condescending familiarities of the other sex; "I have the whole romance by heart. Fierce love on the part of the gentleman; negative encouragement on that of the lady; a proposal on the one hand, and a refusal on the other. You see I have nothing to learn."

"Indeed!" was the ambiguous rejoinder; "and so you consider that to be a romance worthy of an acknowledged beauty? Why, my dear Sir, I could weave a better for the gawky daughter of a village curate."

"Never mind the curate's daughter; but indulge me with one according to your own view of things. Something pretty, piquant, and peculiar. I adore love-stories."

It was a strange, almost a frightful look, which Mrs. Lamerly turned upon her companion. There was a mocking triumph in her eye which darkened its pupil until it became almost purple; and an expression of eagerness in the dilated nostril and quivering lip that added to its fierceness; but it passed away as rapidly as it had risen; and, bending over the child, she said simply,—

"I have no imagination."

"I do not ask you to imagine anything; you

know the world so well, and must have such a store of memories."

"Do you suspect that I could be guilty of treachery?"

"I suspect nothing; but, as my meeting with you this morning has marred my sport for the day, I feel that you owe me some compensation."

"You seem to forget that you have given me great cause to complain of you."

"I?"

"Yes; undoubtedly. As Sybil's most familiar friend, I had a right to expect at your hands far greater courtesy than you have shown me."

"My dear Mrs. Lamerly;" said Frederic, as he took her hand and retained it, despite a slight, a very slight struggle for its release; "I am not a fashionable man; and always approach my wife's friends with caution."

"How incorrigible you are!" was the smiling reply; "You always will misunderstand everything. To hear you, any one would really imagine that I wanted you to make love to me."

"That would be very easy, and very pleasant;" remarked Mortimer.

"Upon my word you are too bad, and I will not allow it;" said the widow, releasing her hand from that of her companion; "so, in order to punish you, I shall leave you to yourself;" and, gently placing the little girl upon her lap, she

began to collect her scattered hair, as if to enable her to put her threat into execution.

"Be careful, Mrs. Lamerly;" exclaimed Mortimer, springing from the ground; "You will awaken Eva. Allow me to act as your *soubrette*. I have a strong arm and a light hand: you shall see how well I can acquit myself."

"How very incorrect, Mr. Mortimer!"

"What can you mean? Can anything be more simple? Does not the child prevent you from rendering yourself this service? and is not that child mine? What glorious hair!" he continued, as he gathered it up, and endeavoured to bind it round her small and well-shaped head; "It is really the shower of Danaë realised."

"What nonsense!" pouted the widow.

"It is a sin to torture it in such a way;" pursued Frederic; "Were you my wife, I should compel you to defy conventionalities, and to wear it *à la Magdelaine*."

A slight suffusion rose to the brow of the lady.

"There, that will do, Mr. Mortimer;" she said peevishly; "now give me my bonnet, and let me return to the house."

"There is the bonnet;" replied Frederic, once more throwing himself down beside her; "but I cannot suffer you to leave me without the promised love-tale."

"I made no promise;" said the lady, still only half appeased.

"Be generous, then, and act as though you had done so. Look round; can any spot be more appropriate for such a purpose? Come, now, I will prompt you—'Once upon a time'"—

"Be it so;" murmured Mrs. Lamerly, as a transient shadow passed across her brow; "'Once upon a time' then—since that is the fashion in which I am to commence—when I was quite a girl—But no, I am in no mood for story-telling this morning; and, moreover, what do you wish to know?"

"All that you will confide to me."

"You deserve nothing at my hands."

"I will hereafter endeavour to do so."

"Well, then, I will be equally generous. Trust not Sybil too far—"

"Ha!—"

"You are, however, perfectly safe at present. She despises the fops and *roués* by whom she is now surrounded."

"And if her cousin were to arrive?"

"What cousin?"

"Trevor."

"Oh, yes; I had forgotten that Trevor was her cousin;" said the simple beauty, playing with a tuft of wild anemones which grew beside her; "I have such a bad memory. Why, if Sir Horace



were indeed to pay you a visit—There would be nothing surprising, you know, in such an arrangement between relations—it might be as well to remember that the iron which has already been ignited heats the most easily. But no, no; he will not come here. And, besides, even if he should, why should he come only to renew his attachment to Sybil? Lady Clara knows him, though, to be sure, he detests her—*that*, I will do him the justice to say: and I know him—just as I know Lord John, and a score of other men about town—but I have not the vanity to believe that I can be attractive enough to tear him from the dear delights of gayer scenes.”

“But, should he come, you advise me to be cautious. You consequently think that, despite his rejection, Sybil loved him?”

“No doubt she did, or things could not have gone so far. And, perhaps if that odious Palermitan Prince had not come in the way, she would have married him when once they were engaged; but she was ambitious, and the title dazzled her vanity.”

“You allude to Prince Saviatti?”

“Of course I do; and after he bowed himself off, it was natural enough that Trevor——But, upon my word, we are talking scandal!”

“As you say, it was natural enough, that Trevor, after having ‘loved,’ should ‘ride away’

in his turn ;” said Mortimer with the apparent calm of concentrated feeling, affecting not to have remarked the tardy caution of her last exclamation ; “these are every-day events, and your romance is no more interesting than my own.”

“ Ah ! but——However, I will say no more upon the subject ;” remarked the lady, affecting to check herself ; “ It is, I think, impossible that Trevor will intrude under your roof, and consequently the past is of little importance.”

“ Trevor is here ;” said Mortimer in a hoarse whisper.

“ Here ! Oh, no ; he knows better.”

“ I tell you he is here ; I saw his carriage approaching as I left the house.”

“ Your eyes deceived you. It is impossible.”

“ Nevertheless he is here.”

“ But upon what pretext can he have come ? Depend upon it, you are wrong.”

“ And if not ?”

“ If not—why then—Oh, I see it all now ;” said the beauty with a forced laugh ; “ his visit will be attributed to me, for we saw a great deal of each other abroad. And perhaps ;” she added, fixing her large eyes steadily upon her listener ; “ perhaps I have been too modest, and it may be so ; in which case Sybil has indeed shown her friendship.”

"She should be grateful to you for such an admission; and do you also love this man?"

"Really, Mr. Mortimer—"

"We are speaking confidentially, you know, and you may answer such a question without repugnance; particularly when I assure you that, should it be otherwise, he shall not remain four and twenty hours in my house."

"Why, you are a perfect tyrant!"

"That is no reply; and I must have one."

"Surely I am not bound to betray myself?"

"Under the present circumstances I think differently. You have now told me either too little or too much, for me not to desire a perfect understanding upon the subject. Should you indeed be the object of Sir Horace Trevor's pursuit, are you prepared to receive him as a suitor?"

"Upon my honour, Mr. Mortimer, I do not comprehend your right to ask me such a question."

"Perhaps not, and yet it must be answered."

"Well, then, it is possible that I might be induced to listen to him."

"So be it," said Mortimer rising; "as your acknowledged suitor alone can he remain an inmate at Westrum. The romance shall at least never reach its climax."

"Your readiness to dispose of me is, at any rate, not very flattering;" pouted the unsophisticated beauty.

"My dear Mrs. Lamerly, I owe you so much gratitude for your kindness to my little Eva, that I am unfeignedly interested in furthering your happiness."

"But suppose I do not love this man?"

"You will be fortunate. It is those who marry where they love only to find their affections cast back upon them, who run the risk of being made miserable."

"Naughty man! What would Sybil say to such a speech from you?"

"If she could make up her mind to be sincere upon the subject, she would tell you that I am quite right. Believe me, Mrs. Lamerly, it is always safer to marry where you are loved, than where you love. The one is an illusion, and the other a reality."

"What *triste* philosophy!"

"I am no philosopher. I advance only a plain fact."

"I am sure that my poor Augustus loved me dearly."

"And can you honestly quote that circumstance as a proof against my argument?"

"Of course I can."

"I am glad; very glad to hear it."

"I cannot think why you should doubt any thing so simple. Of course I never could forget that he ran away with me in defiance of all his

disagreeable relations. Every woman is proud of such a proof of her power."

"No doubt of it, but gratified vanity is not affection."

"I detest such subtle reasoning."

"Because it is unanswerable; is it not so? However, to oblige you, I am willing to concede that yourself and Mr. Lamerly were examples, despite your love-match, of a contrary result; but you know that exceptions only prove the rule."

"I do believe that you are laughing at me."

"I dare not. You are too handsome."

"Upon my word, Mr. Mortimer—"

"And, upon my word, Mrs. Lamerly, I am perfectly serious. Again, I repeat that you are too handsome to be trifled with without risk. Suppose now, for instance, that Sybil should surprise us at this present moment—"

"I care not though she should."

"Yet she might think, and perhaps say——"

"She *dare* not!" exclaimed the usually supine widow, with flashing eyes; "She dare not!"

"Am I to understand that she would dread a retort?"

"Perhaps so"

"Mrs. Lamerly, I beseech of you to tell me seriously——"

"No, I will not say another word. And now,

since you have taken fright, leave me ; and, if you will do me the favour, be good enough to desire Mrs. Harris to come and take charge of Eva, for I doubt whether I have strength to carry her all the way to the house."

Mortimer paused for a moment, and glanced down upon the beautiful young creature before him, upon whose brow a shade of offended dignity was discernible. Half fascinated, and half terrified by the strange mixture of coquettish simplicity and undaunted worldliness which was betrayed in her every word and action, he could not, at that instant, forbear assimilating her to the glittering, but envenomed serpent, which, while it enthrals the eye, poisons the life-blood. Nevertheless, he could not altogether liberate himself from the spell. It was the first time that he had looked upon her without positive dislike ; and yet, instead of resenting a coldness which would have irritated many women less attractive, she had scarcely disguised a far more flattering feeling towards himself.

And at what a moment had she done so ? When, dreading he knew not what ; conscious of his wife's utter and selfish indifference ; and suspicious of every one by whom she was approached, his mortified vanity and disappointed affection alike led him to resent so false and comfortless a position.

He could not doubt that Trevor had triumphed over the heart of Sybil long before he had believed it to be his own—and should he suffer him to enjoy a second triumph over that of the fair creature before him? True, Trevor could make her his wife; but *would* he do so? Did she even anticipate such a result? Mortimer scarcely believed that she did; nor had he sufficient confidence in her principles to imagine that she would long be swayed by such a consideration. He could not conceal from himself that he despised, and almost feared her; but he was becoming reckless, and—he was human.

The result of his momentary silence was a proposal himself to take charge of the sleeping child, and to accompany Mrs. Lamerly to the house.

“But suppose Sybil should see you;” said the widow, with an arch and mocking laugh.

“In my turn I reply that I care not.”

“Well, then; suppose that Trevor should see *me*?”

“You can alone decide if that circumstance is likely to affect you;” retorted Mortimer, with offended vanity.

“Such a family group!” again smiled the lady.

“I wish it were!” retorted the gentleman; and in another moment Eva reposed quietly upon the arm which he extended to receive her, and the bright-eyed widow hung confidingly upon the other.

“And now, will you promise not to be jealous

of Trevor?" she asked in a low whisper, as she approached her coral lips to his ear.

"We shall see;" replied her companion, in the same subdued tone; pressing the little hand which rested against his side still more closely.

"And not to suspect Sybil?"

Mortimer laughed; but it was not the buoyant laughter of earlier days, and of earlier hopes.



## CHAPTER X.

Nothing could exceed the excitement produced by the arrival of Sir Horace Trevor upon the circle assembled at Westrum. To most of the party he was unknown, save by report, but that report had sufficed to ensure his welcome; for he was precisely one of those individuals whom the women are ambitious to see in their train, and the men to quote as an acquaintance. Self-centred, worldly, and satirical, he possessed every quality calculated to shine in society; and as the said society cares only to be dazzled, tinsel passes current as readily as sterling ore.

Trevor had few vices; and it is probable that, had he been educated in a different school, he would have adopted some more worthy ambition than that of merely figuring as "a man about town;" but the evil, which in his case owed its origin to his pecuniary independence, and consequent freedom from the enforced thralldom of professional study, was gradually increased by his own experience of men and manners—aye, and of women too; for even that fact must be admitted in his justification.

Once, as we have seen, he had loved earnestly and well; and moreover, with a perfection of moral courage which had enabled him to disregard the gibes of his more dissolute associates; and to look forward without false shame to the time when he should have degenerated into a common-place married man; but even here his honesty of purpose met with no answering truth; he became the prey of a coquette, and was made the sacrifice of a heartless cupidity; and from that hour Trevor vowed an eternal enmity to marriage. A mere votary of pleasure, the whim of the moment was the sole rule of his life, the most minute care of his person his only serious occupation; and, as a natural consequence, he became the model of a certain set, and was dressed at and aped accordingly.

Capricious as a spoiled beauty, he was one hour the assiduous cavalier of some fair and fashionable trifler, and the next a bitter satirist upon the whole sex. Disappointed in his earliest aspirations, and blighted in his holiest affections, he affected to disbelieve in the existence of any pure and disinterested attachment whatever; maintaining that human nature, and more particularly female human nature, was incapable of profound feeling of any kind; and could only skim along the surface of sentiment and sensation, as the dragon-fly ruffles the wavelets of the meadow brook upon whose current it is too weak to settle.

As he had begun life by investing everything about him with a fictitious brightness which would not bear the test of trial, so he revenged himself upon his own delusion in after-years, by deepening and darkening every shadow that fell across his path. Systematically sceptical, he doubted even where his reason should have been convinced. A Sybarite on principle, he was irritable under everything which interfered with his individual gratification; and when he occasionally encountered persons of more liberal ideas, he either sneered at them as dupes, or denounced them as hypocrites.

But again we repeat, that Trevor was only such as the world had made him; that world of fashion, frivolity, and falsehood, which was his peculiar atmosphere. He was a moral wreck, which nevertheless retained some portion of its original brightness.

Strictly honourable, according to the conventional acceptation of the word; recklessly generous, and imperturbably good-tempered, the bitterness which occasionally passed his lips never penetrated to his heart; he was weak, but not wicked. When he gamed, it was merely to divert his idleness; he cared little for the result, and consequently never lost his courtesy with his money. When he betrayed the woman who confided in him, he did so with a perfect conviction that he had simply dis-

tanced her in the race of deceit; and when he sacrificed the interests of a friend to his own, he felt no compunction, convinced that the said friend would have done precisely the same, had he possessed a similar opportunity.

Such was the man whose advent beneath the roof of Mortimer occasioned such universal gratulation. He had, as we have seen, arrived early in the day; and Sybil learnt, with a sensation of relief, that he had taken possession of his apartment before her other guests were assembled at the breakfast-table. Confident as she felt in her power over her husband, she was for the first time conscious of an anxiety which she had never hitherto experienced. She was quite aware that Mortimer both despised and disliked the circle which she had already drawn about her; and she knew full well that Trevor would be even less acceptable to him. It might be also that a vague presentiment of danger warned her of the probable consequences of her weak compliance with the suggestion of her *soi-disant* friend, Mrs. Lamerly; and that something like a doubt crossed her mind as to the perfect good faith in which it had been made. Her woman vanity whispered that, having once loved *her*, it was impossible Trevor could be thrall'd by the baby-graces of the fantastic little Amabel; and, if it were not so, why, after the insult which he had offered to her at The Grange,

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should he be once more forced into her path? Gladly would she have forgotten his existence, for his name it was which was inscribed in the darkest page of her life's volume; but she felt, whatever might have been the evasions of the crafty widow, that she was in possession of the fatal secret which she was anxious to conceal from Mortimer; and that she was consequently so thoroughly in her power that she could not protect herself from the impending evil.

Sybil was, however, no weak and trembling woman to be scared by shadows; and, thus driven to rely upon her own strength, instead of yielding to impotent alarm, she endeavoured to fortify herself by arguments tending to reassure her mind. Trevor had already tested the power of her former affection by endeavouring to renew it; and he had failed. She was now married, and he must be convinced of the futility of further pursuit. He had, moreover, offered to her an insult which he must be well aware that no woman of pride or principle could ever pardon. But at this phase of her reasoning Sybil paused; and although no one was near to detect her unbidden emotion, she covered her face with her spread hands, to conceal the rimson blush which mounted to her brow. Alas! what faith could Trevor place in either her pride or her principle? Had she not deceived him cruelly? And was it not from his weakness that

she had wrung the resources which had enabled her to make a second dupe ?

This reflection for a time prostrated her courage ; but happily she had been prepared for the struggle which awaited her ; and during the time that had elapsed between the departure of Mrs. Lamerly's invitation, and the arrival of its object, she had possessed ample time to decide her measures. She must not receive him coldly ; as such a want of courtesy to a bidden guest could not but excite the suspicion of those about her, while it might, moreover, tend to impress Sir Horace himself with the idea that she feared him. Neither must she permit him to resume the easy and familiar tone, which would almost warrant the trial of a second impertinence, from which her dignity as the wife of Mortimer might be insufficient to secure her. No : she must meet him with a smile and an extended hand, it is true ; but the smile must be cold, and the hand passive. She must regard him only as the presumed suitor of an early friend ; and leave Mrs. Lamerly to do the honours of Westrum to her own visitor.

How she regretted that they still had a mutual secret, and that she could not, without compromising herself in the eyes of her husband, at once and definitely divest him of the privileges of their presumed relationship ! but this she was painfully aware was now impossible. How she loathed the

folly which had induced her to avoid confiding in the mad passion of Mortimer before their marriage, when a few tears and smiles would have induced him to overlook even the presumption of an admitted rival; and which had thus bound her hand and foot before the altar of deceit and falsehood.

It was, however, vain to deprecate the past. Were she to confess to Frederic that she had betrayed his confidence in her truth in this one instance, what might he not suspect? And his suspicions once aroused, where would they end? She dared not risk such an attempt. The reverberation of the past storm was beginning to make itself heard; and for the first time Sybil felt herself powerless to avoid its contact.

How she lingered at her dressing-table, as if delay could profit her in such an emergency; but at length the last string was tied, and the last frill adjusted. Her maid, astonished, and at length irritated by her unusual tardiness, had begun to busy herself in repairing the disarray of the chamber; the warning bell had rung, and she felt the necessity of controlling her emotion. Not even then, however, could she compel herself to proceed at once to the breakfast-room; but, snatching up her gloves and handkerchief by a sudden impulse, she left the chamber, and proceeded hastily to the nursery.

There she found only Mrs. Harris and her assistant, by whom she was informed that Miss Eva had been for the last two hours in the grounds, under the guardianship of Mrs. Lamerly.

"And who authorized you to trust your young lady out of your sight for such a length of time?" inquired her mistress angrily; the circumstance affording a safe escape-valve for the hitherto hidden bitterness of her feelings.

"Indeed, ma'am;" hastened to reply the astonished nurse; "I thought you must have known that the kind goodnatured lady takes Miss Eva out every morning when the weather is fine enough for her. If I had thought that you would object--"

"Of course I object;" retorted Sybil imperiously: "I will permit no interference of the sort. You should immediately have acquainted me with this caprice of Mrs. Lamerly's."

"As my master was aware of it, ma'am, I supposed—" commenced the female functionary, anxious to justify herself.

"Oh, indeed; your master was aware of this arrangement, was he?" interposed Mrs. Mortimer sarcastically; "and does he also undertake to amuse Miss Eva during her daily absence of two hours?"

"I am sure, ma'am, I cannot say;" answered the nurse, becoming more and more alarmed at



this exhibition of displeasure, succeeding as it did to so habitual an indifference to the movements of her charge.

"You appear to be strangely ignorant of your duties, Mrs. Harris;" said Sybil sternly: "and I must request that in future no one may be suffered to interfere with the arrangements which I see fit to make for my own child."

"You may depend upon it, ma'am."

"I do;" replied Mrs. Mortimer. "And now, go at once in search of the little girl, and bring her here. I will await your return."

At this moment a clear ringing laugh became audible, and footsteps were heard ascending the side-stairs which led to the nursery; while in the next instant the lisping voice of Mrs. Lamerly exclaimed in accents of childish amusement—

"Ah! you may open your large grey eyes, Eva, and stare about you with astonishment! Yes, you fell asleep under a tall sycamore; and here you are, you can't tell how, at home again, and on the very confines of your own domain! Oh, fairy; you have guessed all about it now! And have you no kiss for papa, who made so pretty a cradle for you?"

The words had scarcely escaped her lips when the speaker crossed the threshold of the apartment, followed closely by Mortimer, about whose neck the child had clasped its little arms. Instantly, as

if by a species of instinctive fascination, the eyes of the two friends were riveted upon each other; but ere long those of Mrs. Lamerly fell before the fixed and almost contemptuous gaze of Sybil; who, after a momentary silence, broke into a forced and bitter laugh, as she said sarcastically—

“Truly, Amabel, you are becoming matutinal! Harris informs me that you have elected yourself head-nurse to Eva, and that you are abroad with her for hours before I have finished my morning sleep. You are really too good. But I fear that to-day, at least, you have been the victim of your own kindness; for I perceive, what I had not before remarked, that the wind must be very high, as it appears to have inconvenienced you during your walk, and a portion of your hair is streaming from under your bonnet.”

“That is very probable;” replied Mrs. Lamerly with imperturbable composure; “for Eva has been amusing herself by inventing for me a *coiffure à la sauvage*. I am sorry that you do not admire the effect.”

“She has seized an unfortunate opportunity for the exhibition of her talent;” resumed Mrs. Mortimer in the same biting accent; “but perhaps you have been too pleasantly engaged to be aware that not only has the second breakfast-bell rung, but also that your friend has arrived.”

"My friend? What friend?" inquired the widow, with a pretty assumption of innocence.

"Sir Horace Trevor."

Mrs. Lamerly shot one quick glance towards Mortimer, who had during this short dialogue been endeavouring to induce the child to leave his arms for those of the anxious Mrs. Harris; an attempt in which he had only just succeeded; and as he turned he met the meaning eyes that sought his own.

"Oh! *your* cousin!" exclaimed the lady with affected joyousness; "How very nice! He will initiate us, in his own dear satirical way, into the latest scandal of half the European capitals; and tell us all about Lady Clara's old flame, General O'Keefe; and Mrs. Babington's French marquis; and poor Saviatti; and half a million of our old friends."

"And is that all you expect from his visit?" asked Sybil, more and more provoked by the perfect *nonchalance* of her friend.

"Oh! no, believe me; by no means;" replied the widow, with marked emphasis; "But you do not say a word, Mr. Mortimer;" she continued, addressing Frederic who had remained silently and steadfastly scrutinizing the words and manner of his wife; "Are you not charmed to hear that our party has received such a delightful addition?"

"Sybil's relatives must always be welcome under my roof;" was the somewhat cold reply; "although, I confess, that on the present occasion I am somewhat perplexed to imagine what can have procured for us the honour of a gentleman's society, who, on the last occasion of his presence at Westrum, declared it to be the *ultima thule*; and regarded its inhabitants as only one degree removed from Hottentots."

"Oh! that is so like Trevor!" said the widow, clapping her little hands, in order to silence the rejoinder which already quivered upon the lips of Sybil; "Did you ever hear him praise anything? He is such a spoilt child. Do you know, he is a perfect sceptic; does not even believe in the love, nor indeed, I am afraid I may add, in the virtue of our sex. Is it not shameful? When every body knows that women——"

"Pray, Amabel, do not inflict upon us what every body knows;" said Sybil with affected impatience; "but ring for your maid to dress your hair, or you will not be fit to present yourself at the breakfast-table."

Mortimer was not, however, to be so deceived. He understood the expression of Sybil's speaking features, and he saw at once that no mere dread of Mrs. Lamerly's disregard for appearances could so thoroughly have ruffled her. He was conscious that although the two persons before him had

ventured upon a war of wit which they were unable to control, there was a mystery in the advent of Trevor which neither was anxious to reveal in his presence. Resolved, therefore, to terminate the scene at once, he pointed with a smile to the door, exclaiming—

“You are dismissed, you see, Mrs. Lamerly; and, in obedience to your liege lady, have only to withdraw; although, fortunately for all who know and admire you, to reappear ere long with increased attractions.”

“So be it;” was the laughing rejoinder; “Good bye, Eva;” and she tenderly embraced the little girl, who was now contentedly playing upon the lap of her nurse; “Your frolics have entailed a terrible lecture upon me; but I forgive you”—and playfully kissing her fingers to the laughing child, she bounded from the room.

## CHAPTER XI.

SIR HORACE TREVOR did not make his appearance until the morning meal was nearly at an end; and he had no reason to repent the arrangement, for the party had just arrived at that satisfied and complacent point when all which follows is rather matter of idleness than appetite; and each member composing it is not only willing, but eager to repay, by the most assiduous attentions, the ample return of news and gossip.

Fortunately, their first meeting was one of less embarrassment than Sybil had anticipated; for there was such a general greeting on his entrance that no one, save her husband, remarked the slight flush which rose to her cheek, and the almost imperceptible quivering of the lip with which she received him as he made his way towards her; or the constrained "You are welcome, Sir Horace," which was her brief response to his eager address. This partial display of emotion was nevertheless by no means calculated to alarm him, for it was no more than every delicately-minded woman might be disposed to feel upon meeting, after an absence,

the man who had once offered her his hand; while in the manner of Trevor himself he could detect nothing more objectionable, as it gave him the impression of a graceful piece of acting rather than the impulse of deep or excited feeling.

Not one of the guests, however, came to the relief of her hostess so effectually as Mrs. Lamerly; who, with one of her childish exclamations of delight, extended her jewelled hand, and said, half-laughing, and half-pouting; "So you have remembered your old friends at last, my dear Trevor; and only just in time, I can assure you; for both Sybil and I had made up our minds to give you up if you did *not* repent your ingratitude. However, you need not look so dismayed: we will forgive you; but in return you must tell us everything about everybody everywhere, and make yourself as agreeable as you can. And now, when you have done shaking hands with Lady Clara, come here, and I will make room for you between me and Lord John." And with pretty imperiousness she motioned to the mortified lordling to advance higher up the table, while she removed her own seat sufficiently to enable the newcomer to occupy the place assigned to him.

She was not, however, so exclusively occupied with Trevor as to overlook the probable anxiety of her host; and more than once she raised her heavy eyelids, and turned upon him one of those

rapid glances of inquiry which betray so little and imply so much. She wished him to understand that she was endeavouring to screen her friend from his suspicions, and sacrificing herself for his peace of mind.

Nothing could be more amiable! And it was beautiful to witness the perfect good-will with which the generous and artless Mrs. Lamerly executed her self-appointed task. Scarcely would she permit Trevor to address his hostess, whose tardy answer was in almost every instance anticipated by that of her friend; and then she had so many questions to ask, and so many half-whispered communications to make, that Trevor found ample employment between his *pâté de Périgord* and her unceasing demands upon his attention.

"After all," observed Lady Clara, with one of the dull stares of her lack-lustre blue eyes for which she was peculiar.—"After all what?" the reader may be inclined to ask, nor can we satisfactorily reply; suffice it that this mode of expression—this *lucus a non lucendo*—was a favourite with the lady.—"After all, Sir Horace, I can scarcely imagine how you could make up your mind to leave Italy, where all is so nice, and so easy going, and so pleasant, for this nasty, dull, foggy, catch-cold country."

"Fie upon you, Lady Clara!" exclaimed Mrs. Lamerly; "Do you suppose that our dear Trevor



has no natural affections; and that even one glimpse of his cousin will not repay him for the sacrifice?"

"His cousin!" said Lady Clara, doubtfully; "why, I never knew that you were his cousin!"

"Nor am I. I allude to Mrs. Mortimer."

"Dear me!" ejaculated the peer's daughter, more and more mystified; "I cannot understand it. Let me see. Old Sir Reginald, his grandfather, had three sons; one was killed in the Body Guards before he was twenty; another married Lady Barbara Dobson, the Nabob's widow, and having no family, left all her fortune to *his* father. And you, Sir Horace, are an only son."

"You are quite correct, *amica bella*," replied Trevor, biting his lips to suppress a laugh, while his ally Mrs. Lamerly was exhausting all her ingenuity in endeavouring to balance a tea-spoon upon the edge of her chocolate-cup; "right as a clerk in the herald's college—only—you have forgotten my aunts."

"I never before heard that you had any."

"*Comment!*" cried Trevor in affected astonishment: "Did you never hear the unfortunate history of the beautiful Mrs. Hildebrand who eloped with her coachman?"

"La! how very horrid!" shuddered Mrs. Babington, settling a curl. "So low!" she whispered to the Honourable Theodore, who lounged beside her.

“And was this sporting lady the ancestress of our fair Sybil?” lisped out the widow innocently.

“Now, all the fates forbend!” said Sir Horace. “No, no; I had another aunt; and were Mrs. Delamere in the room she could answer all your questions; but it is fortunate, as we have fallen upon this topic, that she is not present; for since Honoria’s lapse she is always extremely distressed by any allusion to the past.”

Mortimer started. Here then was, at last, one tangle of the ravelled skein drawn out; and once more Sybil stood acquitted. A smile, which was almost one of relief and gratitude, flitted across his lip; but meanwhile the sensations of Sybil herself were infinitely less satisfactory. The audacious and unblushing effrontery with which Trevor had thus invented for himself a supposed family connexion which had never in reality existed; the easy complacency with which he had calumniated the character of her sex in order to make his tale run more glibly; and the self-satisfied look with which he turned towards her at its completion, in order, as it seemed, to claim her gratitude for his exploit; rendered her more and more conscious of the depth of the abyss into which she had been plunged by her own levity.

Who can calculate upon the bearing and result of a first deviation from the high and holy principle of truth? To extricate herself from a mo-

mentary difficulty, Mrs. Mortimer had volunteered what she believed to be a mere inconsequent falsehood; and she now felt that, at the instant of its utterance, she had herself attached to the sword of Damocles the one frail hair by which it was hereafter to be for ever suspended over her head. Henceforward it was indeed vain to hope that the lie could ever be retracted, and she must abide its consequences, be they what they might; while, as if to augment her mental torture, Lady Clara continued to pour forth her surprise in the "Dear me!" and "Well, I never!" of mindless astonishment.

"You must tell us all about your Aunt Hildebrand;" interposed Mrs. Lamerly, during a momentary pause. "It must be such a funny affair! I can understand a woman falling in love with a prince, or a——"

"Or a margrave;" whispered Trevor in her ear.

"For shame! you are really unbearable;" pouted the lady; "But do tell us the story. Or, perhaps," she continued, interrupting herself abruptly; "now that we know all about it, Sybil will give us the details."

"You are too obliging, Mrs. Lamerly;" was the indignant response of her hostess; "and, moreover, I pledge you my honour that I am as ignorant of them as you are."

"I am convinced of it;" said Sir Horace, with

well-assumed gravity. "From whom were you likely to hear such a relation? Certainly, not from your mother."

"How very improper Mrs. Lamerly is at times;" remarked Mrs. Babington, *sotto voce*, to her neighbour.

"What! because Sybil's aunt ran away with her coachman?" exclaimed the widow, who had detected the incautious whisper. "Why, what on earth had I to do with it?"

The pretty inanity of this lisped expostulation elicited a general laugh; and, to the great relief of both Mrs. Mortimer and her husband, the subject was abandoned.

No man could be more what the French expressively call *facile à vivre*, than Sir Horace Trevor; and, despite all his resolutions to the contrary, Mortimer soon found himself with him on terms of intimacy, which, previous to his arrival, he would have declared impossible. Trevor was in fact, in a few days, emphatically and actually at home at Westrum. An hour had sufficed to render perfectly evident to him the tolerating indifference of Sybil towards her husband, whom he had long learned to despise for the weakness which had betrayed him into the power of a woman without principle or honour: while, had he needed an interpreter, his sworn friend Mrs. Lamerly was ever at hand to render every look and word intelligible.

Between the baronet and the widow there existed no secrets. He was aware of the whole of her past career; had worshipped at her unrighteous shrine when she swayed the fortunes of the pigmy court of —; had been indebted to her for a host of those trifling services so invaluable to the travelling Sybarite; and had, in return, vowed to her one of those everlasting friendships which are so convenient to the worldly and unscrupulous, and wherein the give-and-take system forms so efficient a bond of union.

It has already been explained that Mortimer had remorselessly wounded the vanity of Mrs. Lamerly, and embittered her feelings; and that what at first had originated in mere levity and idleness, had become in her eyes an imperative duty to herself; and as she mentally argued, a just and consistent vengeance upon the insolent security of Sybil. How dared Sybil affect at times to question, and almost to sneer, whenever she alluded to the period of her widowhood? Was Sybil, then, so faultless, that her past life had woven a circle of light around her which was impassible?

As she asked herself the question, the thought of Trevor recurred to her—but Trevor was at Venice. What then? Could she not summon him to her side? And she did so; we have seen with what result.

"Do you know that you are a species of miniature divinity?" said Sir Horace to his fair and frail ally about a week after his arrival at Westrum, as he found himself alone with her in the morning-room. She was busily engaged in knitting a silk purse, or some other of those useless follies by which the idle and opulent so seriously injure the efforts of the poor and the ingenious: while he, seated on a low stool at her feet, was amusing himself by tuning and untuning her guitar. "You are, indeed! But come now, be frank and honest. You do not expect me to believe that you had no ulterior view in thus bringing me into contact with my improvised cousin; and that it was solely and entirely *pour l'amour de mes beaux yeux* that you called me from Venice?"

"What other motive could I have?"

"Nay! that is precisely what I seek to learn. That you have one is beyond a doubt; and that it is personal, is equally certain to one who knows you so well as I do. Surely, *cara*, you do not love this Mortimer? Why, child, you had better bestow your affections upon a willow-bough; satisfied, while the wind blows it hither and thither, that it must return to its natural position when the breeze falls, than upon such a human *girouette* as Sybil's husband."

"What an absurd idea!"

"What is it, then? For that I am no desired,

or even desirable guest, to either the lady or the gentleman, is perceptible enough ; and, therefore, you had some reason for urging my presence ; and that reason I must know, or I bid adieu forthwith to this cave of Trophonius, with its two solitary gleams of sunshine. I love to commence, as Horace—wasn't it Horace?—says, *ab ovo* ; therefore, I must be initiated into all the mystery of the springs before I consent to set the machinery in motion."

" Why will you not be guided by me ? "

" Because I do not love to walk through the world with a bandage before my eyes ; and, moreover, because I want to comprehend the probable extent of the obligation which you will owe me. "

" Well, then, I am displeased with Sybil ; *et pour cause*. "

" Ha ! I begin to understand. You have something to revenge ? "

" A great deal. "

" But, when you have so much in your own power, why should you have recourse to my assistance ? Make the man love you, and you will have ample means of vengeance. "

" And what would that avail me ? " asked the lady with some asperity ; " save to afford her a new triumph over what she is pleased to consider as my levity ? No, no ; I will adopt no such imperfect policy. So long as she continues under his

roof, and is recognised as his wife, the contest is unequal."

Trevor smiled and struck a few discordant chords on the instrument which he was torturing.

"Now, pray do not make that horrid noise;" said Mrs. Lamerly; "but tell me at once if you no longer care for Sybil."

"No longer care for her!" echoed Sir Horace with sudden animation; "Impossible! Why she is handsomer than ever."

"And sick to death of her humdrum husband, and her old-fashioned country-house;" pursued the lady in the same tone. "Had you a spark of spirit, you would need no prompting from me."

A second, and a more intelligible smile gleamed over the features of the Baronet.

"I see it all now;" he said with a light laugh; "Sybil once gone—And you really think such a thing *might* occur?"—He was answered by a significant gesture; "The willow wand would require a prop; and who could he so pleasantly lean upon as the sympathising friend who would be upon the spot, and who is so well calculated to act as a second mother to his child?"

"And suppose it were so?"

"Oh, I have not a word to say against it. Nothing could be better imagined; and, as a matter of course, it would be an immense relief to my conscience. But—but—I must venture one more



question ;” and Trevor really looked embarrassed for a moment ; “ As I should be deeply grieved to compromise your pretty self, without some prospect of fulfilling your projects, I tell you frankly that I believe you have little chance of becoming the *wife* of this worthy squire.”

“ And why not ?” asked the lady indignantly ; “ Did he not marry Sybil ? ”

“ He did ; and it is precisely for that reason that I conjecture he will just have wit enough to be very cautious how he commits himself a second time. Now, don’t look so defyingly. You know all that I mean ; and you are quite aware how high an opinion I have of your abilities, as well as how sincerely I admire your person ; but, nevertheless, —— ”

“ Do you mean to insult me ? ”

“ Not a whit ; but if we are to be honest confederates, we must thoroughly understand each other. I thought you had more strength of mind.”

“ Pray leave me to conduct my own affairs ;” said the widow sullenly ; “ I flatter myself that I am quite competent to such a task.”

“ I never doubted it for an instant ; but still I felt it my duty to warn you.”

“ Wait till I am in danger.”

“ With all my heart. It is understood, then, that we are to be faithful allies ? ”

“ Have we not a common interest ? ” .

"True. My question was an idle one; and I deserve the rebuke. Our mutual undertaking is, however, by no means easy. Sybil evidently shuns me."

"She fears herself more than you."

"That, at least, is encouraging; and I will trust to your penetration; *car vous avez passé par-là*. Now, do not be angry again: frowns never become you; and you know, by experience, that they are wasted upon me. But, tell me; for whom are you labouring so diligently?"

"For Sybil;" said Mrs. Lamerly, with a sneer.

"What a graceful attention!"

"Is it not? Let it serve you as an example."

And then, having accomplished this mutual understanding, they talked of other matters perfectly irrelevant to the subject which still, however, remained uppermost in their thoughts; and, worthy colleagues in evil, did so with smiling brows and friendly tones, undisturbed even by the intrusion of Mrs. Babington and her honourable hanger-on, despite the curious and somewhat supercilious looks which were occasionally riveted upon them. They had so much to ask and to tell; so many dear friends to be canvassed and condemned; and so many schemes of pleasure to arrange, that they both continued apparently unconscious of the *espionage* to which they were thus unceremoniously subjected.

## CHAPTER XII.

WHEN Gertrude awoke on the following morning, she was several minutes before she could collect her thoughts ; and, as she cast her eyes round the desolate apartment which had been allotted to her, her first impulse was to close them again, in order to shut out all surrounding objects ; but, in the next instant, she felt the utter folly and weakness of thus shrinking back upon the very threshold of her task ; and, springing lightly from her comfortless bed, she hastened to dress herself, and to be prepared for the first summons she might receive.

The dark and soot-laden fog still hung heavily over the street, clung to the dingy window-panes, and made its way through the ill-fitted frames even into the chamber. No one requires to be told all the wretchedness of such a waking ; while to Gertrude, totally unaccustomed as she was to a London atmosphere in any season, it seemed as though her very breathing were impeded. Steadily, however, she persevered in her purpose ; and at length, closely folded in a thick shawl, but

still trembling with cold, she made her way down stairs, with her writing-case in her hand, to the little parlour in which she had first been received. The shutters had been thrown back ; and as no preparations had yet been made for the morning meal, she found herself at liberty to sit down at once, and commence the somewhat difficult task of explaining to Ernest her sudden evasion from Bletchley.

Until the very moment in which she prepared to do this, she had never become thoroughly conscious of the delicacy of the undertaking ; for one look round the squalid apartment in which she was seated, sufficed to convince her that she must still conceal from him the exact nature and situation of her temporary home. Undoubtedly some human feeling of hurt pride and wounded personal dignity mingled with other and less selfish convictions ; but it is nevertheless certain that the guiding-spring of her conduct was a consciousness that she had no right to intrude a stranger beneath the roof of a ruined relative, of whom she had already seen enough to be well aware that he valued, at even more than their just price, the privileges of which poverty had denuded him ; and would consequently ill brook that an indifferent, and, perchance, scrutinizing eye, should be permitted to rest upon the nakedness of the land.

Such a position was very irksome to Gertrude, whose nature was truthfulness itself ; but she was

compelled to admit that in this case the withholding of the whole truth was part of the painful duty which she had imposed upon herself when she obeyed the summons of her dying uncle; and with a sigh such as she had never thought to heave on sitting down to address Ernest, she commenced her task.

She told him of the hasty and imperative call which had been made upon both her duty and her affection for her mother's memory; of the state in which she had found her unfortunate relative; nor did she shrink from avowing that he had sunk from affluence to poverty. And then she besought him to bear with her if she entreated that he would not attempt to see her until her return to Bletchley; and not only forgive such a request in his own person, but even justify her in the eyes of his family, should they appear to resent the step that she had taken.

"He was my mother's only brother;" she concluded; a stern and prosperous man, who was regardless alike of family ties and family affections during the greater portion of his life. He existed, consequently, unloving and unloved; absorbed in large financial speculations, and engrossed by gold. Think, Ernest, what must now be the bitterness of his regret, and the desolateness of his position. His hard-earned gains have melted away within his grasp; the penury at

which he used to scoff is abiding under his own roof; and he has found no other source of comfort than a desire to possess for the (I fear) very brief remains of a wasted life, the society of his hitherto unknown niece. Can you not, therefore, easily pardon both him and myself? And will you not readily do so? *We* have so many long years of happiness before us; while *his* days are already numbered, his hopes annihilated, and his grey hairs bowed down by misery, both actual and mental. I do not fear your reply to such an appeal; for I know your heart, and I have confidence in your consistency. Do not, however, believe that in requiring you not to seek me out—you, who are in my thoughts at every moment; and perhaps even, (for I know little of the great wilderness of which I am now an inhabitant,) within a few streets of the very house of which I have become an inmate—that I do so without an immense personal sacrifice. You will at once feel this to be impossible. Never had I greater need of sympathy; but I cannot on that account add another pang to those by which the wounded spirit of my dying uncle is evidently crushed to the very earth. Bear with me, then, as I would cheerfully bear with yourself in such an extremity. It is already much that I may be with you in thought; and that I am enabled to shelter myself from the present in the future.”

Her letter to Miss Warrington was more easily written. To her she had only to announce her safe arrival under Mr. Spencer's roof; and to express her wish that none of the family at the Manor-house should be made acquainted with her place of residence.

"He may linger," she added; "and should such be the case, I feel convinced that Mr. Armstrong would not permit me to remain in his house; a thousand kind, but needless apprehensions on my account, might induce him to prevent the accomplishment of a duty which I consider as most sacred; and of which I should lament the omission throughout all my life. I leave my fate, therefore, in your hands, and I am assured that you will not betray me."

Her task was scarcely accomplished ere Gertrude heard a stealthy step approaching the apartment, and saw the staid attendant of her uncle enter laden with the meagre preparations for breakfast. The astonishment of the worthy woman was extreme, on perceiving that the young lady whom she had been fearful of awakening after her fatigue, was already up and occupied; and she busied herself with quiet alacrity in rendering her as comfortable as circumstances would permit.

Nothing could, however, remove the aspect of cheerlessness by which the orphan was surrounded; the clinging fog looming heavily and luridly through

the window, and obscuring every object without; the dusty grate, the curtainless cornice, the time-stained walls within, all conspired to depress her; and it was almost with a sense of relief that she heard the dull sound of her uncle's cane upon his uncarpeted floor, as he knocked to announce that he required the presence of his housekeeper.

Mrs. Sharp hastily poured out a cup of coffee, diluted it as she had done on the previous evening, and then placing a small slice of thin dry toast in the saucer, hurriedly obeyed the summons; nor did she return till the frugal meal of Gertrude was accomplished, when she announced that her master would see Miss Mortimer in a few minutes.

"He is much changed since last night, Ma'am;" added the woman; "and although he never alluded to it, I could see that he was very anxious from the time he wrote to you, lest you should refuse to come to him; for I more than once heard him mutter to himself; 'If she does not, there is time yet! There is time yet!' And then he laughed. You have heard him laugh. As for me, I would much rather hear him cry at any time than laugh that frightful laugh; it always chills my blood. "But I am wrong to talk of this to you, Ma'am; I was only going to say, that I think when he saw you at last he felt a great deal, though he was too proud to let you see it; and the agitation has been



too much for him. He had some trouble to swallow his coffee, and the bread he could not touch. Poor gentleman! I believe that his troubles are nearly over."

"Then, for pity's sake;" exclaimed Gertrude clasping her hands entreatingly; "send at once for his physician. Surely you can procure a messenger somewhere in the neighbourhood, and I will pay him whatever he requires, provided he lose no time. See to this at once, Mrs. Sharp, and I will attend to my poor uncle during your absence."

The housekeeper shook her head.

"I dare not, Ma'am;" she said timidly; "You do not know my master; but if you authorize me to venture upon it, I will send a boy for Mr. Jackson, who can come as if by accident on his way somewhere else; and then he can advise you as to what is best to be done."

"By all means;" said Gertrude eagerly; "by all means—now—this instant. I could not incur so terrible a responsibility alone."

"Mrs. Sharp curtsied and left the room; and when the orphan heard her open the house-door, and close it gently behind her, it was with a feeling of terror which she could not overcome, that she remembered she was alone with the dying man. Dead, she would perhaps have feared him less; for there is a mystery and a holiness in death which rebuke the weaknesses of the living;

but dying, and dying *thus*—without a thought or a care for the Great Beyond, towards which he was hastening,—without an anxiety on the subject of that life which must endure for ever, and wholly occupied by the cares and futilities of that which was so rapidly to close upon him!—It was very frightful; and the poor girl bent down her head, and buried her face in her hands, as she listened breathlessly for the return of her messenger.

It was not, however, the welcome footstep of the zealous housekeeper which fell upon her ear as she sat there in her terror, but the renewed pounding of the heavy cane upon the boards in the room above; and, starting from her chair, she swept back the long curls from her forehead, and hastened to obey the summons.

Even prepared, as she was, to see a change in the countenance of the unhappy invalid, she, nevertheless, started with surprise and fear as her eye first fell upon him. The hectic spot upon his cheek had deepened into purple; his lips were livid, and his brow bloodless; while it was evident, by the rapid convulsions which passed over his features, and the wild, fierce light which glistened in his eyes, that nature was making a last and powerful effort, which would in all probability utterly exhaust his slight remains of strength.

“Ah! come—come;” he said almost in a whisper, as with faltering steps, which she in vain

endeavoured to render steady, she approached to his bed-side; "Come—for I can set your mind at ease. I shall not need your annuity, child; what remains in the house will now last my time. Sit down, sit down; and let us talk."

"Shall I not rather read to you, Sir?"

"How can you?" he asked peevishly; "I have already told you that the paper never comes until the evening."

"But in your present state;" again asked the orphan timidly; "could I not find something more appropriate, more comforting, than the mere news of the day?"

"Ah! understand;" said the sick man, as a sardonic smile quivered for an instant over his faded lips; "You care nothing about the money-market—You do not condescend to addle your brains with the dull concern of consols, and foreign securities, and all the great interests of a commercial country. I am sorry for it, child; I am sorry for it; for such indifference to the most important considerations of a rational and enlightened kingdom will bring bitter repentance in time. No, no; I want no reading. I want to think, and to speak; and I have little enough time left for either. No fear of being taken at your word, child; the annuity is safe enough!" And that strange, unnatural laughter, deprecated even by the accustomed Mrs. Sharp, again burst from

the parched throat of the fevered invalid ; but on this occasion, not with impunity ; for in the very paroxysm of this forced and bitter mirth, a gush of blood followed the sound, and streamed down over the sheet which covered the breast of the sufferer.

Gertrude uttered a faint shriek, as she flung her arm about his neck, and raised his head from the pillow. It was a fearful moment for the solitary and inexperienced girl ; but the sick man soon partially rallied.

“ Thank you, thank you ;” he murmured huskily ; “ and now give me a drop of water.”

Gertrude laid him down softly, and held a tumbler to his lips.

“ Began at 99 ;” he whispered with closed eyes, after the silence of a moment ; “ and closed at 101½. Better times are coming ; better times. I must keep my eyes about me. Gertrude, where are you ?”

“ I am here, Sir.”

“ That was a great rise, Gertrude. A great deal may be made by such a rise as that. I used to be very fortunate—very ; at least folks said so, though I never believed that luck had much to do with it. Gertrude, if you should ever be rich—you know you will have the annuity which you offered me to begin upon, and many there are in the world who have reared a goodly brood without such a nest-egg—If you should ever be rich, watch

the funds, child—watch the funds; and remember your poor uncle.”

“Pray do not excite yourself, Sir;” said the anxious girl. “You are, just now, quite unequal to such an exertion. You need rest.”

“I shall have enough and to spare before many suns set;” was the reply of the faint and exhausted voice; “Leave me in peace now. And, Gertrude—”

“I listen, Sir.”

“Gertrude, I say, do not forget the pocket-book; and if Jackson should ask for it when he comes—for he must come after I am gone, you know—don’t give it to him; but make him show you his accounts. It is a large sum—a very large sum, for a poor man to handle; and—and I want to be quite sure that it will be well laid out.”

“You shall be obeyed, Sir.”

“Good girl! Good girl! Worth a score of your mother. *She* married for love, poor fool; and then wanted me to pay the debts of her spendthrift husband. *You* have been wiser. An Armstrong will do, child; an Armstrong will do. You must be prudent and saving for a few years, and things will come round. Take care of your gold, and—your—gold—will—take—care—of—you.—I——”

There was a long pause, for the sick man was utterly exhausted; and Gertrude, drowned in tears of mingled fear and horror, could not even

attempt a reply: when, suddenly rallying once more, the invalid panted, rather than uttered; "Why do you close the shutters? Nothing can be done in the darkness. Give me light. I must have light—broad, unblinking sunlight. I shall be robbed in this foul darkness. Robbed? Who shall dare?" and he clenched his dry and withered hand, and attempted to extend it in menace; but he strove in vain; his muscular power was spent, and the shrunken arm fell powerless at his side.

What wild, and conflicting, and bewildered visions, must have passed over the brain of the dying man during the hour which succeeded! for truly, throughout one long, and, as she believed, interminable hour, did the miserable girl watch beside that unholy deathbed, unsupported, alone, and quivering with anxiety for the return of her messenger; who, meanwhile, having duly fulfilled her mission, had not ventured to enter the sick-chamber unbidden, and was, in her turn, awaiting, in her cheerless solitude, the advent of the poor humble clerk, who was to be their sole support and comforter throughout the coming trial.

Strange unconnected snatches of thought were incoherently revealed by the sick man in disjointed, and faintly articulated sentences. Now it was a fresh and far-off glance at his green and joyous boyhood; and a wild smile played about his lip, as

the vision of some pilfered orchard passed before him; and while the congenial scene occupied his mental vision, he clutched the bed-clothes with a convulsive grasp, as if fearful of being cheated of the spoil that he had won. But this comparatively tranquil waking-dream soon vanished, and the toil and turmoil of more manly struggles were enacted over again. Like one who saw before him the open pages of a ledger, he calculated immense sums with an accuracy which filled his terrified listener with silent astonishment; pausing, at intervals, to utter stern denials, as it seemed, to some importunate petitioner, or to chuckle over some successful venture; and throughout all this fearful time, whatever might be the broad outline of the mental picture conjured up by memory, the same dark shadow hovered over it; the greed of gain hung darkly about it; the pencil of avarice polluted all its features. He was the breathing embodiment of a solitary idea. No reminiscence of affection; no soothing consciousness of one generous deed done, and registered for hereafter, flitted, like a good angel, through the memories of the past. His horizon was without light; the lurid gleam of gold was the only ray which had power to penetrate the gloom.

Gertrude thought of the placid and prayerful death-bed of the protectress of her youth; and averted her look from the rapidly-working

features, and endeavoured to close her eyes against the mammon-worshipping words, of the dying man who lay before her. Her heart sickened as the conviction forced itself upon her reason, that beyond fulfilling the mere trifling and unimportant duties required by the sinking body, her care could here be of no avail: for the voices of the soul had become clogged by the base yellow fluid to which it had been abandoned, and it no longer found utterance for higher or nobler aspirations.

Suddenly the hoarse murmur ceased; and then came one of those deep and awful periods of utter stillness so solemn in a death-room. All was silent and chill; and the wordless prayer which was poured out by the stricken spirit of the watcher, arose pure and untinged with one taint of earth: an offering for him who cared not to supplicate for himself. And it would seem that it brought a blessing, for once more the wandering mind was cleared of the mist by which it had been over-shadowed; and when next the sick man spoke, he had regained the entire possession of his temporarily suspended faculties.

"Gertrude;" he whispered faintly; "I have no time to lose. Listen to me. Take the key which you will find in my pocket-book—but give me back the book, give me back the book. I like to feel it under my pillow, for then I know that it is safe. Good girl! Good girl! Now open that



chest ; and at the top—at the very top, mind, you need not search lower—you will find a packet of papers. Bring it here.”

Gertrude silently obeyed, and placed in the eager trembling hand the sealed envelope which lay ready on the surface of the chest.

“All right, all right ;” murmured the failing voice of the sick man ; “and now lock the box carefully again, and give me back the key. There, that will do.” And, for a time, he turned the well-secured packet over and over ; gazing at it with a fondness incomprehensible to his companion. Now he clutched it closely between his open palms, as though he sought to make it grow into his flesh, that thus it might become inseparable from himself ; then he patted it lightly with his fingers, as a playful mother would have patted the rosy and peach-like cheek of her nursing ; and, finally, he pressed it to his heart with a sigh so deep that it made Gertrude start.

Soon, however, he became aware that he was no longer equal to the excitement which it produced ; and, drawing the orphan closer to him, until her head was bent over the pillow, he placed his wasted finger upon his lip in sign of caution ; and whispered shrilly—

“You must have it—You must have it—So take it now. It will never be to you what it has been to me ; but there is no help for that, there is no

help for that. Little as I have to leave, it shall be yours. Sell the furniture, it will pay your journey home. Jackson has the duplicate; send for him. But do not trust too much even to *him*, Gertrude; I know what temptation there is in gold, and we have no right to tempt others. Look to yourself, girl; look to yourself. Love is all very well; and virtue is a mighty fine thing for those who can afford to dress it out in purple and fine linen; but it will not go far in a money-loving world, if it stands naked and shivering by the way-side, holding out its hand for help. No, no; proverbs are not proofs, except when they are built up upon the wisdom which is only taught by the close contact of conflicting interests. Send a man upon 'Change with his head crammed with stale morality, and a shabby coat upon his back before he has purchased the right to wear one, and you will see what his virtue and his necessities will do for him. Trash! Trash!—I have lived long enough to —”

The voice suddenly ceased—the unhappy man had fainted.

The scream which Gertrude was unable to suppress caught the anxious ear of the housekeeper; who, to the great relief of the agitated girl, entered the room, followed by the poor old clerk, whose stealthy step gave back no echo, as he rapidly approached the bed, and laid his hand

upon the breast of the unconscious invalid. His first impression evidently was that his former patron had suddenly expired, but he at once discovered his error; and a few drops of etherized water, forced through the clenched teeth of the wretched man, ere long restored him to consciousness. The hard, keen light had, however, departed for ever from his eyes, which, during that death-like swoon, had become dull and glassy; the breath, which came hot and halting from between his livid lips, heaved his chest almost to suffocation; and beads of damp stood upon his forehead, and dimmed the lustre of his grey hair.

Jackson shook his head, and a moisture stole to his eye. He, perhaps, was the only being upon earth who loved the dying man then lying panting and struggling before him; but the human heart is strangely constituted; and there is as much of the affection of habit in the world, as that of actual sentiment. Thus the poor, hard-worked, and ill-requited drudge, who remembered when he had been promoted from the invidious position of errand-boy to the honours of the raised desk, and the dignified appellation of junior clerk, that he should, in all probability, never have attained even to that dreary pre-eminence without the favour of the stern and exacting principal, (who, having remarked his economical management alike of coal,

cinders, and writing-materials, resolved to profit by so unusual a demonstration on the part of a subordinate) had vowed an affection and a fidelity to his unendearing master, which no severity or after-meanness had power to weaken ; while time, as it passed by, served only to rivet the iron links forged by the one, and worn almost as a trophy by the other.

They had grown old together ; their hair had silvered, and their step become less elastic from year to year ; and each had noted the change in the other, although unconscious of it in his own person.

Even now, as Jackson looked upon the dying man, worn out alike by worldly anxieties, and the narrow penury to which he was himself condemned by his slender and insufficient means, the tear which started to his eye was impelled thither by no reflection upon his own advanced pilgrimage, but fell solely for the sufferer. Perhaps no thought of the dread debt which all must pay, had ever yet connected itself with his visions of the future ; he had no time for sickness, and less for death.

Mr. Spencer had withdrawn himself from the firm, and closed his ledgers and day-books for ever ; his hours were no longer purchased and absorbed by business ; but *he* was still at his post ; his income must be earned ; the bread of his

family must be won before it could be broken ; he came upon earth to work ; and so he laboured on, like the patient ox treading out the corn of others, and never caring to look beyond the narrow circle of his daily duties. The Sabbath brought him rest, it is true ; but even that was the merely negative repose of physical and moral idleness. As he lay back in his slippery and ill-cushioned horse-hair chair, with his eyes closed, and his lips quivering, he was generally reviewing in thought all the commercial transactions in which he had been engaged throughout the previous week ; or, when, by chance, the sunshine wiled him out, and he sauntered forth, with his meek and spirit-broken wife upon his arm, to bask in the warmer and purer air of Tower-Hill, or the Artillery-ground near Finsbury Square, he could command no other subject with which to beguile the way ; and thus the bewildered woman, whose faded shawl had seen its seventh summer, and whose solitary silk gown had long been camelion-hued by time, was entertained, hour after hour, by the detail of operations involving thousands and tens of thousands of pounds ; and, perhaps, taught to repine that, of all the mighty mass of wealth which was yearly poured out under the eyes of her labour-bowed helpmate, so very, very minute a portion ever passed into his own possession.

It may be thought that, this moral portrait of

the obscure and hardworking drudge of commerce is overcharged, but we know that such is not the case. Even in the present day many, too many, of these human automata, these breathing machines, set in motion only by the peculiar springs adapted to their avocation, and rusted into uselessness for all beyond their own peculiar and narrow sphere of compulsatory action; men in whom even the sense of physical enjoyment and moral dignity have alike become deadened, or at best distorted, by the mindless monotony of their daily tasks; may still be found in all great cities, but more especially in our own mammoth-like and all-absorbing London. The world-grasping trader, whose argosies encumber distant seas, and to whom the winds come from every quarter of the globe freighted with gold; the merchant-princes, whose ingots sway the fate of empires, and whose occasional ruin shakes the whole fabric of commercial Europe; these ask hands, ready, and willing, and obedient hands, to work out the design of the one master-spirit of the Pandemonium of gain; but with the head or the heart of the salaried slave they have nothing whatever to do, so long as they interfere not with the just execution of his allotted task.

Brighter days, as it is hoped, are now dawning; nay, have already dawned, for the obscure but important class of labourers, who, like the miner,

prepare the ore of commerce for the crucible; but it will require time to awaken within them sufficient moral energy to send them forth on the heart-gladdening sabbath free from the heavy cares and sordid speculations of their daily and hourly existence.

What refinement of intellect, what generosity of sentiment, can rationally be anticipated from the raw and almost uneducated youth, who grows on to manhood in the close and stifling atmosphere of gain?—Who, year by year, hears every quality of the head and heart exposed to the test of wealth?—Who learns, and who never forgets, that the “best man on ‘Change” is he who buttons his snug great-coat over the largest amount of bank bills? Human nature will be human nature still, under every phase; and although the generous spirit may for a while contend, it is ultimately silenced by the potent spell of self-interest and self-advancement.

Yet it is beautiful to reflect how comparatively few of these slaves of the lamp wholly degenerate—how steadily they toil on, surrounded by what they hold to be the greatest good on earth, and yet preserve their honesty. Health and hope may alike fail, but their task is before them, and they perform it nobly to the last; rejoicing or sorrowing as the coffers of their employers are filled or emptied; and making a common interest of what

they have almost taught themselves to feel as a common cause.

And Jackson, poor, humble-hearted, long-enduring Jackson, was one of these. The opulence of the house to which he belonged was his glory and his pride, and almost seemed to reflect its prosperity upon his own squalid home. He would not have resented a personal affront; his courage would have failed him for such a purpose; but a syllable which reflected upon the credit of his employers would at once have roused him to indignation and defiance.

And now, as we have said, his heart was full. His world was a narrow one, and he could ill afford to lose one of the objects about which it had closed in. He spoke to the dying man—once—twice—in a meek, low voice, which faltered with feeling: but no answer was returned. It was evident that the little strength which yet remained to him was expended in the firm clasp which he still retained of the important packet.

At length his lack-lustre eye wandered languidly round the apartment until it rested upon Gertrude, who sat weeping silently apart. For an instant an expression, almost of fierceness, convulsed the muscles of his face, but it passed away, and he motioned to her to approach. She obeyed; and then, with considerable difficulty, he placed the papers in her hand, and once more closed his



eyes with a groan which no mere bodily anguish could have extorted from him.

Despite his affliction, a gleam of satisfaction irradiated the hard features of the observant clerk. He even nodded his head significantly towards the agitated and bewildered girl, as he murmured almost inaudibly, "It is done at last. It is done at last; and now he will be easier!"

Then he drew still nearer to the sick-bed, and bent over the sufferer as if to compel one last look of recognition; but he watched in vain. Mr. Spencer had resigned his most cherished hold on life, and was still battling with the necessity to which he was compelled to yield. He lay for a while still, quite still and motionless, while the labouring spasms from which he had been previously suffering were subdued, and he breathed lightly and almost imperceptibly; nature was, however, only pausing for a brief space, in order to rally all her remaining energies for one last effort; and as the anxious watchers stood around him, he suddenly sat upright in his bed, with extended arms, and clutching fingers, as he shrieked out:

"Give me back my gold!—My gold! I have toiled for it; fasted for it; and it is mine!—ALL mine! Give it back, I say! Has it not cost me alike body and soul? Thieves!—Thieves! Will no one help me? Miserable old man that I am, give me back my gold! I cannot die till

I have counted it once more—only once more—and then ——”

But again the crimson tide gushed from his lips, and he fell heavily back upon the pillow; there was a sharp struggle, a low sigh, and Mrs. Sharp drew Gertrude from the bedside.

“ You had better leave the room, ma’am;” she said, as she supported the tottering steps of the orphan to the door; “ You can be of no further service here, for the poor gentleman is gone.”

## CHAPTER XIII.

THE poison worked at Westrum. It was in vain that Mortimer sought some cause of quarrel with his unwelcome guest, for Trevor was too listless and too well bred to take offence where he persisted in declaring that such an intention was impossible; while, once more thrall'd by the beauty, and fascinated by the accomplishments of his brilliant hostess, he became cautious in his demeanour, and measured in his attentions. The master-spirit of Mrs. Lamerly was, moreover, at work; and the presence of Mortimer always sufficed to call forth all her playful and pretty coquetry, addressed, as those around her supposed, to the fashionable baronet; but which she tempered by such appealing glances towards Frederic, as encouraged him to believe that he had at least an equal share in their display.

A heart cast back upon itself is easily awakened to renewed happiness; and we already know the morbid yearning of Mortimer for the affection of those about him. Much, therefore, as he despised the friend of his wife, he could not continue insensible to her evident preference of himself. True, she appeared to put forth all her powers in order

to dazzle Trevor; but when they chanced to meet without witnesses, the brilliancy of her eyes was softened by an expression of meek and womanly devotion, which, to a nature so sensitive as his own, was infinitely more attractive than the most radiant smiles. All her coquetry disappeared, all her factitious graces were laid aside; and her very voice faltered as though it trembled to meet his ear. Yet still he did not love her. Even slighted as he was by Sybil, she had been too thoroughly the ideal of his fancy to fade at once from his heart; and a gnawing unhappiness, which to him appeared a presentiment of evil, clouded his spirit.

Nor was the position of Sybil herself one of less constraint and difficulty. The unfortunate relationship which she had invented between herself and Sir Horace, naturally invested him with privileges which he could not otherwise have claimed; and although he never addressed her in the language of gallantry, there was, nevertheless, a peculiarity in his manner of which it was impossible for her to remain unconscious; while they had so many tastes and prejudices in common, that his society possessed a charm in her eyes of which she could not divest it.

Too indolent to indulge in the sports of the field, utterly unoccupied by business of any kind and consequently at the disposal of the circle in which he chanced to move, Trevor found many

opportunities of renewing his old friendship with Sybil, and of profiting by the advantages due to her indiscreet deception, while Mortimer was engaged in the superintendence of his estate, and attending agricultural and county dinners; and it was singular upon those occasions, how capriciously Mrs. Lamerly turned all the battery of her baby-graces upon Lord John, or the Honourable Theodore. Lady Clara sneered, and Mrs. Babington raised her fine eyes in horror; but the widow heeded neither sneers nor glances; she was accountable to no one for the variations of her mood; and so she calmly lisped out her piquant slanders, and revenged herself by an indifference to all comment which, in a better cause, would have been almost sublime.

Meanwhile, the intimacy between Sybil and her old lover strengthened with every succeeding day, and unconsciously she recovered the elasticity of spirit which appeared to have abandoned her since her marriage. Every sentence became once more an epigram, and every impulse a fascination. The calmer temperament of Frederic had, in some degree, checked the exuberance of her nature; but with Trevor she was once more her former self. Her vanity was flattered, and she soon ceased to remember all the imprudence and the mortification of the past. Encouraged by his evident admiration, and the delight with which he parti-

cipated in those sarcastic, witty, and pungent conversations in which she felt that she was unrivalled, she too soon forgot that he cared for nothing save the gratification of the moment ; and gave herself up unresistingly to the spell of his sympathy.

With the most intense selfishness did Trevor watch every gradation of feeling which she exhibited towards him ; and had he trusted himself to speak upon such a subject, he would calmly have declared that he was neither her mentor nor her guide ; that he was in no way responsible for her actions ; and that past experience had not tended to discourage him in his present pursuit. But Sir Horace had few friends, and no confidant, save indeed the diplomatist's widow, and even she had volunteered the office, and was endured rather than encouraged. His secret was therefore safe ; and the self-deluding Sybil left free to shape out her own destiny.

Surrounded by persons who, from peculiar causes, were at once authorized and inclined to be indulgent, Mrs. Mortimer had no one near her, save her mother, who would have put forth a hand to lead her back into the path of prudence ; and even that mother appeared wilfully to close her eyes against the growing evil.

But it was not so. No change of place or society had any longer the slightest effect upon Mrs. Delamere. Always languid, listless, and

hypochondriacal, her days succeeded each other in the most insipid monotony. Scarcely did she appear conscious of the change of season, or the progress of time.

The boldest flirtation might have been carried on in her very presence, and she would never have remarked it. Her early years had been those of indolence and inertness, by which her mental faculties had been enervated; a period of pain and anxiety supervened, in which, true to her acquired nature, she weakly resigned her own will and wishes—her own better will, and worthier wishes, into the keeping of her daughter; and if at times a sickening dread of the ultimate result of that daughter's actions bowed down her feeble spirit, she no sooner saw her doubts removed, and her terrors terminated, by a marriage which surpassed her hopes, than she sank into a moral lethargy, from which she made no effort to escape.

Satisfied that Sybil *was* married, she never cared to remember that she might yet have many trials before her, dangerous to so vain and ambitious a nature as hers; and as her counsel or opinion was never asked upon any subject, so neither did she seek to proffer it.

Nothing, in short, save actual bodily absence, could have created a more effectual separation between mother and daughter, than the system which they had severally adopted; and if an

appeal was, by some strange chance, made to Mrs. Delamere by a third party, the never-failing reply of, "Sybil knows best," was the inevitable result of so bootless an attempt to identify her with the events which were taking place about her.

Nevertheless, every incidental attention or mark of affection which she received from her child, would light up the dull eyes of the old lady for a moment; but these gradually made a less demand upon her maternal feelings. The spirit of the world, with all its exacting follies and engrossing vanities, had fastened upon the heart of Sybil, and left her little leisure for sympathy in the whims and wishes of a voluntary invalid; while so perfect was her power over the weakened nerves and failing faculties of her mother, that after she had once or twice warned her of the danger of betraying the falsehood of her implied relationship to Trevor, poor Mrs. Delamere almost succeeded in persuading herself that it really existed; and when Sir Horace, half in jest, and half in scorn, occasionally addressed her as his aunt, she replied to his remark without the slightest symptom of discomposure.

Thus all conspired to aid the projects of the vain and worldly baronet; too cautious to commit himself in the presence of Mortimer, by word or look, he had made good his footing at Westrum; while Mortimer himself, too weak to declare and



enforce his will, even where he felt it to be right and fitting, lest he should once again be made the scoff of the idle and the impertinent, and cited as a jealous husband, and moreover somewhat engrossed by the clever coqueties of Mrs. Lamerly; suffered the growing intimacy of the *soi-disant* cousins to progress as it might; satisfied that, upon the first legitimate occasion, he should be able to terminate it by a word.

Such an experiment is at all times hazardous, but especially so with persons of the temperament of Mortimer—men who are contented to live on *au jour la journée*; procrastinating for the sake of momentary peace; hedged in by morbid prejudices; and never glancing beyond a certain and narrow range of vision. Men, moreover, who have been reared and fostered in the worship of self, and who must be injured in that precious self before they can force themselves into energy.

An imprudence, or rather, be it said, an indiscretion on the part of Sybil, would have aroused him on the instant, because it would have touched his honour; but he had nothing tangible to work upon. The whole tone of his wife's society was objectionable, but it was nevertheless considered a privilege, even by the most prudent and correct of their country neighbours, to be admitted within its charmed circle; and he dared not, therefore, complain. They had talked of retrenchment on their

return to Westrum, yet, far from taking steps to retrieve their former excesses, they were, even under their own roof, and in that comparatively obscure part of the country, still living considerably beyond their means. Yet here also he feared to remonstrate. Had he not assured Sybil, when she formerly rejected his hand on the plea of her own ruined fortune, that he could so amply supply her every wish, that she would never have cause to remember so unimportant a circumstance? It is true that he had not speculated upon the outlay requisite to gratify all the elegant caprices and high-bred exactions of a vain and worldly woman; that, accustomed to the quiet and unostentatious comfort of his mother's household, he had never calculated upon the amount of expenditure necessary to maintain, in proper keeping and consistency, a large establishment, with its concomitant equipages, attendants, and table. He saw himself surrounded by guests about whom he cared nothing, and who returned his indifference.

He was no longer at home in his own house; he had no interest in common even with his wife; and yet he hesitated to break the spell which was darkening about him. His only hope lay in the attainment of the office for which he was still soliciting; but hitherto he had merely received professions which had brought forth no fruit. Still, the *ignis fatuus* lured him on. He was afraid to

believe that he could ultimately fail ; and when he ventured to expostulate with Sybil upon the subject, she coolly dismissed it with the remark, that so long as they continued in the country nothing could be anticipated in the shape of definite success. People must be upon the spot to carry a point of so much importance ; and meanwhile he was, if not enlarging his circle of friends, at least binding them to his interests by hospitality and kindness.

Mortimer listened ; and even if he did not quite believe, he at least yielded, and Sybil's point was gained. Her days passed on amid admiration and amusement ; she forgot the past, and she would not look into the future ; and thus week after week went by, until the winter was drawing to a close, and her party rapidly dispersing ; Lord John took flight for the last month of the dead season, to dullify dutifully with the duke, his brother, at his old castle in the Highlands ; the Honourable Theodore to Baden-Baden, at once to increase his debts and to distance his duns ; Mrs. Babington to her aunt's in Dorsetshire, to try the effect of her matured charms on a rich cousin recently arrived from India ; and Lady Clara to Paris, to make her annual curtsy at the Tuileries. Mrs. Lamerly, however, still lingered ; she had no rich cousins, or ducal brothers—no footing at the French court, or stake at the *rouge-et-noir* table ; and she found it so difficult to tear herself away from her little pet

Eva, and her comfortable home at Westrum, that day succeeded day, and she still maintained her post.

At length, however, when even Trevor, despite the well-worn privilege of his cousinship, found himself compelled to depart in his turn; as Sybil made no sign when her dear friend more than hinted that she was ready to sacrifice herself till the commencement of the London season, Mrs. Lamerly was reluctantly forced to follow his example; and then, for the first time since their marriage, Frederic and Sybil found themselves alone beneath their own roof.

Much as Mortimer had desired such an opportunity of retrenchment, it was not, however, without something like regret that he saw the carriage of the widow drive off. She had amused his idleness; and better still, she loved his child. He had now, moreover, no opportunity of escaping from his reflections; and they were far from consolatory. He had been married little more than twelvemonths, and he had already exhausted three years' income, lost the affections of his wife, trifled with his self-respect, and compromised the future prospects of Eva.

For a few hours he felt melancholy; and even the caresses of his little girl had partly lost their charm; but as the evening drew in he became less sad, and more irritable. A feeling of indig-

nation mingled with his self-reproach. He began to consider himself as more sinned against than sinning; and as the victim of circumstances which he had neither possessed the power to foresee nor to prevent; while at intervals something like anger against the supine indifference of Sybil to interests which were so vital to himself, mingled with his musings.

They had retired from the dining-room, where they had partaken of a *tête-à-tête* dinner almost in silence, a nervous attack having confined Mrs. Delamere to her chamber for the day. A single lamp burnt upon a console at the extremity of the apartment, while a small reading-table stood beside the chair of Sybil, who lay listlessly back among her cushions, with closed eyes, mechanically passing a paper-knife along the already-opened pages of a review. From time to time, however, she looked up with ill-concealed impatience at the gorgeous timepiece upon the mantel, as if to chide the tardiness of the jewelled hands; while Mortimer occupied the other side of the fire-place, and sat gazing upon the mimic pageantry of towers, and rocks, and monsters, presented by the burning mass before him.

A cloud was upon his brow, and his lips were rigidly compressed. The enchantress who had wiled him from himself was placed so near to him that their extended hands could have met; but the

enchantment was nearly over, and those hands were not outstretched.

As he arrived at the last phase of his reflections Mortimer suddenly raised his head, and looked earnestly at his wife. Her eyes were once more closed, and this fact only increased his irritation.

"Perhaps, Sybil;" he commenced abruptly; "I shall find no better opportunity than the present for endeavouring to impress upon you the necessity of an immediate change in our mode of living. So far, I have only been weak; but, should I suffer it to be pursued much longer upon its present scale, I should become dishonest. The subject is an unpleasant one for both of us; it must be so; but it is my duty not to shrink from it. The unfortunate delusion into which I was betrayed by my ambition, has, I think, by this time disclosed its utter fallacy; and, consequently, the immense outlay which was intended to further its success must finish with it. My fortune, ample as it is, or rather was, will no longer suffice to maintain so large an establishment; and we must also remember that we have a daughter."

"You have chosen a strange moment in which to sermonize;" was the calm reply; "nor is the tone of your communication calculated to reconcile me to its import. One would imagine that I was the person to blame for the outlay of which you complain."

"I had no intention to reproach you, Sybil; but, even as you have shared my pleasures, so did I believe that you would be willing to bear your portion of my anxieties;" said Frederic; "It is but another disappointment to find that I have been deceived."

Mrs. Mortimer raised herself proudly to a more erect position, as, with a scornful gesture, she asked petulantly; "And I—think you that I have not also had to contend against mortification and disappointment? Do you imagine that I have no cause for regret? Did I not frankly confess to you before our marriage that I could never bear to be confounded with the common herd who are satisfied to vegetate, and have not moral energy to live? Have I not subsequently urged you to escape from this social nullity? And how have you responded to my appeal? Discouraged on the very threshold of success, apathetic where you should be resolute, and looking to the means when you should care only for the end, you have negatived all my previsions; and I am condemned to see you fall back contentedly into the insignificance from which I have been labouring to withdraw you."

"Sybil!" exclaimed her husband, starting to his feet—

"We are both, it would appear, unhappy in the selection of our subject to-night;" was the

cold response of Mrs. Mortimer to this involuntary demonstration of indignant anger; "but we shall do well to understand each other. My good offices are still at your service, should you care to accept them; although I cannot submit to be lectured like a froward child."

Mortimer pressed his hand upon his burning forehead. He feared to trust himself with words.

After the pause of a moment Sybil again spoke, and it was with less asperity. "Listen to me, Frederic," she said; "Let us not forget the respect which we owe to ourselves by bandying reproaches. You know the ambition of my nature, nor have I to learn the supineness of yours. I cannot forego the hope that I shall still see you assume that station in the world to which you are entitled; but I know enough of public men, and of public life, to feel convinced that, without some effort and some sacrifice on your own part, it is vain for you to anticipate success in any undertaking. You just now quoted your child as a reason for withdrawing from a contest in which the attempt itself does you honour; and I now quote her as an incentive to exertion. A brilliant position in life will advantage her more than all the hoarded gold which you could ever accumulate in obscurity."

"But what if I am ruined in the process?"

Sybil shrugged her shoulders. "You talk as though you had no resources."



“ They are, at least, not inexhaustible.”

“ At all events,” said the lady, as with one of her most sunny smiles she extended her hand to her husband; “ they will suffice to renew the trial. The coming season will, beyond all doubt, decide the question of your success. The first and most difficult step is already taken. Your pretensions are known, and your eligibility for the post you solicit has been admitted. The rest is a mere question of time, and the judicious employment of private and powerful interest.”

“ Sybil;” said Mortimer, as he clasped the proffered hand, and, thoroughly appeased, looked fondly in her face: “ that smile has thrown me back upon the past. I shall not seek to resist it. Only encourage my endeavours by a renewal of the affection which I feared that I had lost, and I will again have faith in your prophecy.”

Nor did the conversation end here; for Sybil, far from wishing, as she declared, to owe the concession of her husband simply to his consideration for her opinion, was desirous to convince his reason; and she accordingly proceeded to do this by the very effective method of alarming him with the fear of ridicule. What would the world say should he return into obscurity, after so brilliant a *débüt*? What *could* be said, save that his ambition had not extended beyond a momentary appearance, destined, like that of a wandering ground-

meteor, only to gleam for an instant with a cheating light, and then to be once more absorbed in the obscurity from which it had so uselessly and idly emanated? Should he now retire from the contest, moreover, all the expenditure of which he complained would have been made in vain; and surely, this fact also required some consideration. And she urged all this so gently, so placidly, with so persuasive a smile, and so convincing an accent, that Mortimer, already dreaming a renewal of the halcyon days of their early marriage, was only too ready to admit the feasibility of her arguments, and too eager to prove his assent to her propositions.

And so the town-house was once more engaged; the equipages retained; the club-subscriptions paid up; and the land-steward silenced for another season.

## CHAPTER XIV.

GERTRUDE had scarcely reached her room, when the solemn promise which she had made to her departed relative, that she would immediately after his decease take possession of the important pocket-book, recurred to her mind; and terrible as she felt a return to the death-chamber to be at such a moment, she did not hesitate to redeem it. For an instant she paused, however, to collect herself, but only for an instant; and then, with a calm step, she recrossed the threshold of the silent apartment, and approached the bed. Beside it knelt the meek and faithful clerk, holding within his own the hand of the dead man; and as, upon hearing the light step of Gertrude, he raised his head, and looked up inquiringly, she saw that there were traces of tears upon his pale and withered cheeks.

Instinctively she laid her hand upon his shoulder, and smiled a sad smile, which he appeared instantly to comprehend; for, rising from his knees, he hastily wiped away the tell-tale moisture, and faltered out in a trembling whisper; "I know it, my dear young lady, I know it. I have no right

to be squandering time upon my own grief, when I should be thinking of you. But, Madam," he continued, with a fresh and irrepressible burst of emotion; "he who lies there was my first friend; almost, I may say, my only friend: to him I owe the bread by which I live. It is hard to part from one's only friend—very hard. The happy and the prosperous cannot understand this, for they have so many that they scarcely miss them as they fall away each in their turn. They do not know what it is to have but one, and to lose him."

"Sincerely do I trust, good old man, that he appreciated your attachment;" murmured Gertrude, considerably affected.

"I cannot say, I cannot say, Madam;" was the melancholy reply, as he stood with clasped hands contemplating the rigid features of his former patron; "None on earth can ever know what were his real feelings; he kept his own secrets, just as he worked out his own fortune. He always stood alone in the world, and he was able to do it, for his will was strong, and he needed no help from others. I shall never know what he felt for me; neither shall I ever forget what he did for me. But for him I might have been a beggar."

"Your gratitude must have brought a blessing to his death-bed."

"I trust it may, young lady; I trust it may. Bless you, at all events, for uttering such a hope!

And now, Madam, what orders have you to give me?"

"First, Mr. Jackson, be good enough;" whispered the orphan, while a slight tremor passed over her, and she clung to the chair near which she chanced to be standing for support; "to give me from beneath the pillow of my poor uncle, a pocket-book which you will find there."

She was silently obeyed.

"And now, if you please;" she pursued; "we will go down stairs to the sitting-room; and I will explain to you the nature of the services for which I shall intrude upon your kindness."

The clerk bowed respectfully, cast another long look towards the bed of death, and then opened the door of the chamber for Gertrude to pass out; but she also paused to contemplate for a moment the countenance of the dead man. The eyes had already been reverently closed, and the luxuriant masses of silver hair drawn more closely about the pallid brow; the outline of the face was strikingly fine and intellectual; the forehead high and broad, the lips well set, and full of firm and almost harsh expression, the nose perfectly chiselled, and the whole character of the head calm and noble; but as the glance of Gertrude travelled on along the sheet by which the body was covered, she shuddered to perceive that even the pang of death itself had failed to relax the firm

clenching of the bony hands. There was something frightful in this resolute grasp which had fastened upon nothing, when life, and all life's possessions were passing from him; and with a deep sigh, she bent for a moment over the corpse while she breathed out a silent prayer, and then slowly left the room, followed by her deputed counsellor.

On entering the little parlour she found that the shutters were already closed; but that, by the active and judicious zeal of Mrs. Sharp, a comfortable fire had been kindled in the grate, while a couple of candles, placed upon the table, gave the room an appearance of comparative comfort. Thankfully did Gertrude throw herself upon a seat, as she motioned to her meek and silent companion to follow her example; and then gave an unconstrained course to her tears, and wept for awhile in silence until the awe and exhaustion produced by the scene through which she had just passed became gradually relieved. Nor did the old man attempt, either by word or gesture, to check this overflowing of her surcharged heart. His respect for the niece of his patron was too profound to enable him to offer the slightest interference with her feelings; and thus he sat mutely before her, with his dim, but now tearless eyes rivetted upon the dingy almanack above the fire-place, and losing himself in speculations and probabilities, which, although some of them might point, however

faintly and doubtingly, towards his own interests, were nevertheless mainly directed to those of the solitary and evidently helpless girl who now looked to him for support.

Perhaps he was not unthankful for this temporary pause. It is, at all events, certain, that he no sooner saw the orphan wipe away her tears, and endeavour to regain her self-possession, than he drew towards him the tattered writing-case, and requested her permission at once to inform his employers of the melancholy event which had just occurred, and to request their promised permission to absent himself from his desk until his presence should no longer be required beneath the roof of his late master.

Gertrude was grateful for the suggestion; and this necessary missive written, it was immediately despatched to its destination by a trusty messenger; while a second, more brief, and requiring less precision, was at the same time consigned to the post, to warn the wife of the writer that she must not anticipate his return until the morrow.

"And now, Madam;" he said, as the door closed upon Mrs. Sharp, and they were again alone; "you have only to inform me of your wishes, and I am ready to obey them. The poor gentleman has, without doubt, already made such communications to you, as will enable us to carry out his instructions."

"He has indeed done so, Mr. Jackson;" replied Gertrude, as with a trembling hand she produced the pocket-book, and proceeded to unclasp it; "This case, as he told me, contains the sum which he wishes to expend upon—" she paused, unable to proceed.

"I understand, Madam;" said the old man, while, with an innate refinement which did him honour, he withdrew his eyes from her face; "and I have only to ask if I can be of any service on the melancholy occasion."

"I depend upon you wholly, my good Sir;" replied Gertrude, drawing the note from its hiding-place; "I am so utterly inexperienced in all matters of business, that I shall be unable to stir a step in this melancholy affair without your aid. Will you, then, take pity upon my helplessness, and dispose of the money as you may judge best; being careful, however, to expend it all, for this one purpose, such having been the express commands of my uncle?"

"You shall be obeyed, Madam."

"But—that is not all;" pursued Gertrude after a painful pause, during which her cheek and brow had become crimson: "Will you forgive me, Mr. Jackson, if I ask you to let me see the—the—in short, to acquaint me afterwards with the precise manner in which it was disbursed? Believe me, I earnestly entreat of you, when I



declare that no doubt of your honour induces such a request: but I must do my duty to the end, painful though it may be."

"Once more be assured that I understand you, Madam;" said the humble-minded and broken-spirited clerk, without one symptom of surprise or indignation. "It is no less my duty than your own to obey *his* will. You shall duly receive my accounts, with which, I trust, you will be satisfied."

Gertrude instinctively extended her hand to her aged protector, for such at that moment she truly felt him to be: but if her inferential distrust of his probity had failed to move him to emotion, such was far from being the case with this exhibition of condescending courtesy.

Everything is comparative in this world; and thus the niece of the opulent head of the house of Spencer, Owen and Co., was, in the eyes of the junior clerk of the firm, so august a personage, that, for a moment, he doubted the evidence of his senses: but when he not only saw that small white hand remain outstretched towards him, but also a sweet smile of confidence and encouragement pass over the fair face of the orphan, he rose respectfully from his chair, and having ventured to clasp it in his own, bowed over it reverently, and then burst into tears.

How much of contumely, and harshness, and injustice—how much of hope deferred, and sicken-

ing anxiety, and withering privation, had that old man taught himself to endure unmoved during a long life of drudgery and toil! He would have smiled in wonder had any one taken sufficient interest in his fate to marvel at his stoicism; for he had long ceased to feel the consciousness of his endurance: it had become matter of habit that he should be buffeted and browbeat by the world: it was the sure inheritance of poverty, and he had accepted it as such. But to the words, and looks, and tones of kindness, he was all unused; and therein, at least, he was no stoic. It seemed to him almost as though he were robbing another of those signs of sympathy,—as if it could be but a glimpse into some unknown world in which he had no share. And yet that world of love and peace, even transient as was the glance, appeared so beautiful; his self-respect, although in his toil-worn breast such a feeling could endure only for an instant, was so awakened, that he could not support the shock; and thus he stood before the distressed and frightened Gertrude, weeping like a child.

“It is nothing, Madam; it is nothing;” he at length sobbed out, as he remarked her look of dismay: “I am better now: but the thought that I was holding the hand of my master’s niece in mine, and that she was smiling so kindly upon me, was more than I could bear. It is an honour, Madam, that will go down with me to my

grave; and I will prove that I am grateful for it. There will not be many such memories to cheer the death-bed of Thomas Jackson."

"I entreat you not to talk in so sad or erroneous a manner;" said the orphan gently. "It is I, Mr. Jackson, who am the obliged person; and who shall have much to remember and to thank you for. And now, what is our first duty?"

"True, my dear young lady; in the joy of my own heart, I had forgotten all else. But it has been so very, very seldom my fate to meet with kindness, that I was for a moment beside myself. Now, however, I will lose no more time, for there is much to be done."

"Are you going to leave me, my dear Sir?" asked Gertrude, as with irrepressible alarm she saw him take possession of his hat.

"I must do so, Madam, for a while."

"But you will return, and share my melancholy dinner, will you not?"

Again the old man raised his eyes to hers in bewildered incredulity: but there was no mistaking the expression of the sweet face that was turned towards him; and stammering out an answer which was unintelligible to Gertrude, and in which she could only distinguish the words *honour*, and *happiness*, and *gratitude*, he bowed more profoundly than ever, and then hurriedly left the room.

It was a relief to the painful feelings of the

orphan to find herself compelled to withdraw her thoughts for a time from the melancholy associations of the morning, in order to give the necessary instructions to Mrs. Sharp for the preparation of the meal to which she had invited her late uncle's humble dependent: nor was it without an expression of delight, which she vainly attempted to suppress, that the worthy housekeeper received her orders. Never before had there been such a prospect of plenty beneath that roof since she had been its inmate; and as Gertrude put the small sum necessary for the purpose of providing the unaccustomed luxuries into her hand, she looked almost as incredulous as the poor clerk.

"I am sorry to give you this additional trouble, Mrs. Sharp;" said the gentle girl; "'but Mr. Jackson is so very kind, and my uncle respected him so much, that I could not bear that he should feel himself neglected. Above all, do not forget the wine: he will have much fatigue to encounter to-day, I fear; nor will you stand in less need of some additional support."

How Mrs. Sharp longed to throw her arms about the neck of the considerate young creature who had even remembered *her* at such a moment! but respect restrained her, and she could only falter out her thanks."

"All shall be done as you desire, Ma'am;" she added, after an instant's silence; "and should

you require any thing in my absence, the nurse is already in my master's chamber, and her daughter waiting any orders which you may please to give, in the next room. I ventured to engage her without your permission, as I feared that you would feel lonely when I was obliged to leave the house."

Gertrude very sincerely expressed her thanks for this consideration, and felt considerably relieved by the consciousness that, on the departure of the housekeeper, she should not be condemned to the sole companionship of the death-room. Moreover, her conversation with the worthy woman, inconsequent as it necessarily was, had tended to restore her to composure; and accordingly she had no sooner withdrawn than Gertrude seated herself at her desk, to inform both Ernest and Miss Warrington of the near cessation of her duties in town, and her approaching return to Bletchley.

She could have chosen no more judicious employment; for the death of her uncle once communicated, her imagination bounded into the future, and she forgot her present trials in the contemplation of her coming happiness; and thus, she poured out her whole heart to her lover, and confessed to him that now, when they were so soon to meet again, she felt all the wretchedness of their brief separation; but she should return to him, as she trusted, a wiser and a better woman;

for she should be more than ever able to appreciate all the blessings of her destiny. And then she had a thousand affectionate messages to send to Mary and Eleanor ; a thousand things to ask of them when they were once more together ; and so she wrote on, and the time passed away unheeded, until a gentle knock at the door announced the return of her guest.

This was succeeded by the appearance of the housekeeper with the preparations for dinner ; and although, as she came and went, Gertrude and her new friend were several times left together, Mr. Jackson carefully abstained from any allusion to the business upon which he had been engaged ; nor did the orphan venture to question him. The common sense of the old man taught him that the subject was not one likely to increase either the appetite or the spirits of the delicate girl, who was now in some degree under his charge ; and so he talked respectfully of the weather, and the state of the streets, and endeavoured to turn her thoughts to other and less depressing topics.

He was repaid for his care by seeing a faint smile at intervals rise to her lips ; and as the pleasurable impression produced by the letter which she had just been writing had not worn off, she seated herself at table with less repugnance than she had anticipated ; and if she did not profit by the comfortable meal before her to an extent which satisfied the

anxious Mrs. Sharp, she nevertheless compelled herself to partake of it.

Meanwhile, the modest old man who shared her hospitality was still less at ease than herself, for even his feeling of regret for his lost master could not overcome his sense of confusion at the strange situation in which he found himself so unexpectedly placed; but gradually, as he saw with what anxious and even affectionate attention his young hostess supplied, and almost anticipated, his wants; and found himself cheered by a glass of tavern wine, which, questionable as might be its quality, was to him, nevertheless, a most unaccustomed luxury, he resumed a certain degree of self-possession, and was able to partake with comfort of the good things before him.

But even this dinner, strange as was such a meal in that abode of famine, could not endure for ever; and when the cloth was drawn, the candles snuffed, and the fire renewed, Gertrude and her companion were once more alone.

For a time both were silent. They had so few subjects in common upon which they could converse, and even these, with one exception, were already exhausted; yet still the old man shrank from renewing that one. He felt that all he had to tell was so sad and so harrowing, that every moment gained was a pang spared to the inexperienced and sensitive girl; but ere long he

began to feel the futility and even danger of any further delay. From one moment to another he anticipated the arrival of those whom he had summoned; and he consequently rallied his courage to prepare Gertrude for their appearance.

There is always something sad, if not revolting, in the visit of those unsympathising servitors of dissolution, who first break upon the stillness of the house of death; the very nature of their errand is fearful—they come to claim all that is left of what was once life, and will, and action—to tread heavily over the floor where others have previously moved with a noiseless step—to talk in hoarse although suppressed voices where the dull echoes have latterly been hushed—and coldly to pursue their avocation in the very presence of eternity.

Perhaps it is well that there is no possibility of delaying this first trial; for where the ties of love have been rent asunder, who would have courage to sanction so unhallowed an intrusion?—Who could summon to the bedside, so lately the scene of agony and prayer, the unsympathising eyes and hands of mercenary strangers? Human nature is ever prone to resist where resistance is possible, and suffering certain; happy is it, therefore, that it is taught in so solemn a moment to feel its own impotence, and to submit.

In Gertrude's case the greater anguish of such a trial was spared; but still it was not without a



shudder and a sickness at the heart, that she learnt the near approach of her lugubrious visitors. Vainly did she endeavour to combat her emotion; for alas! her thoughts reverted to another and a dearer death-bed, and she remembered what she had formerly experienced. Nor was this all, for memory is as ingenious to wound as to console; and as she dwelt upon the loss of her earliest friend, all the sorrows which had succeeded that bereavement came freshly before her.

The sullen tread of feet in the narrow passage, and the murmured sound of strange voices, at length announced the advent of the expected functionaries; but it was not until the stairs had ceased to creak under their steps, that the kind-hearted old man, who had averted his eyes from Gertrude as he saw her suddenly conceal her face in her handkerchief, and struggle for composure, rose silently from his seat, and followed them.

Poor girl! she felt very wretched; and more thoroughly alone than she had ever yet done. Fain would she have shut out every sound; and still, with that morbid yearning to the terrible so inherent in a sensitive nature, she strained her ear to detect their movements, and followed them in fancy through all their gloomy task. It was a great relief to her when they at last departed. The first sad act of the drama of death was over, and she breathed more freely.

## CHAPTER XV.

WHEN the old man, who was now her sole support, again entered the room, which he did a few minutes subsequently, he was even paler than before; and there was an expression of anxiety upon his care-worn face, which he could not conceal; he, however, seated himself in silence, and made no attempt to break the stillness. Some time consequently elapsed in dark and dreary thought on both sides; until Gertrude, more and more convinced by the uneasy working of his features, that he desired, but had not courage, to make some necessary communication to her, resolutely addressed him.

“ You have something to say to me, Mr. Jackson, by which you fear that I shall be distressed ?”

“ Not distressed, I trust, my dear young lady; but you have already suffered so much, that I cannot bear to add to your trial by telling you that you have still a painful duty to perform. Mr. Spencer perhaps informed you that he had left a will.”

“ It is in my possession;” replied Gertrude quietly.

"Are you also aware that I hold the duplicate?"

"I am."

"And this will, Madam; do you desire at once to ascertain its contents? If so, I must summon Mr. Collins, by whom it was drawn up, as I believe that it would not be legal, and certainly, in any case, it would not be advisable, to open it in his absence."

"We will, if you please, defer all such considerations until after my poor uncle's funeral. Under any circumstances, I could not permit myself to exhibit what I should regard as a disrespectful anxiety, by suffering its contents to be investigated at an earlier period; while, now, as you are well aware, it is a matter of no consequence whatever."

The worthy clerk looked up in the most profound astonishment, but he made no comment upon her words.

"We have, fortunately;" pursued the orphan, in the same calm and unexcited tone; "received from his own lips all the instructions necessary to enable us to fulfil his latest wishes as regards himself, and to those only I am anxious to confine my thoughts until they are scrupulously accomplished. The rest of our task will then be reduced to a mere painful ceremony."

"But, my dear young lady;" urged the old man deferentially; "would it not be well so to

arrange as to enable you to conclude all your painful duties on the same day?"

"I shall be most grateful to you, if you can accomplish so desirable an object."

"Leave it to me, leave it to me;" said her companion, flattered by the confidence which she reposed in him. "My present principal, Mr. Owen, will wish to be invited to the ceremony, for he has already mentioned the matter to me; while, as I before ventured to observed, we cannot dispense with the attendance of Mr. Collins. Are there any other persons whom you desire to summon?"

"I am a stranger in London;" replied Gertrude, gratified to find that her uncle would be followed to the grave at least by two of his former associates; "but you may probably be aware of other individuals to whom the attention is due."

Jackson shook his head. "He lived much alone, Madam, as I have already told you, and made few friendships. He was an able man in his office, and found there all the amusement that he required. I believe that we can do no more."

"So be it, then;" said the orphan; "I leave every thing in your hands, satisfied that you will act with kindness and judgment. And, my dear Sir, should some small increase of funds be necessary, do not scruple to say so. I have not much in my power, but ——"

"Not a pound, not a shilling, young lady;"

was the rejoinder; "it is not from a residence like this that people look for an expensive procession. I have already made my calculation; we are amply supplied; and, in accordance with my poor master's directions, have only to assure ourselves that the money is well laid out."

Gertrude sighed: to her it was so difficult to reconcile the idea of worldly prudence with the exigencies of the death-room. She had yet seen too little of life to be aware how often the sublime is merged in the vulgar; how small interests jar upon lofty duties; and how tenaciously the demands of every day existence retain their hold under the most solemn circumstances.

The week which succeeded was a trying one to the lonely girl. The shrouded and confined corpse, the closed windows, the measured tread, the suppressed voices, were all full of dark and gloomy association; but slowly as it seemed to wear away, it at length terminated; and from her narrow window she saw the modest procession leave the house. Her tears fell abundantly, as she remembered that the cold corpse which they were then bearing to the grave had once been warm with life, and had, if not loved her, at least felt for her, during a few short days, the interest of a relative; and she was thus bound only to two other beings on earth; while even one of those two had ceased to admit the claim.

Moreover, the house of death is always desolate when the one object of all the thoughts and cares of the survivors is borne from it for ever; and not even the unaccustomed stir and lightness which so soon succeed, can for a time disperse the sadness by which it has been so long invaded.

Wearily and heavily, therefore, did the time pass by until the return of the funeral party; at which period the orphan was aware that, repugnant as it might be at such a moment to her feelings, she must prepare to meet and thank the friends of her uncle, who had thus testified their respect for his memory.

Beyond this consideration Gertrude never looked. She was aware that the will of her deceased relative was to be read; and she had been warned by the careful old man, who had superintended all the arrangements, that she could not reasonably absent herself. It was therefore a duty to be accomplished; and she prepared to fulfil it, only marvelling at the necessity of a will where there was nothing save the squalid remnants of poverty to bequeath. It seemed like a mockery under the circumstances; and a mockery so solemn that it could produce nothing but pain.

"Would that my poor uncle had trusted to my good feeling!" she murmured to herself, as she smoothed back the glossy braids of her hair, bathed her swollen eyes, and cast a last languid look at

her mourning dress, which, since the death of Mrs. Mortimer, she had never laid aside ; “ He had so little to leave ; and the two faithful, although humble friends, who have tended him to the last, have so richly earned that little, that he had only to express a wish, or to confide in my sense of justice, to have dispensed with this last needless ceremony. But such has been his pleasure, and I have only to obey.”

Calmly, therefore, although affected by a nervous tremor which she could not control, as she remembered that she was about, after a period of utter seclusion, to meet persons to whom she was totally unknown, she awaited the message which was to summon her to the parlour ; and when the gentle tap of Mrs. Sharp sounded at the door, she rose without a word, and followed her with the important document in her hand.

As she entered the little sitting-room, both the gentlemen gave a perceptible start ; but in the next instant they bowed profoundly as they were presented to the pale and beautiful girl who, in her close mourning dress, and with downcast eyes, stood timidly before them. A chair was already placed for her beside the table ; and in a few moments she recovered her self-possession.

The common-place condolences exacted by the occasion were courteously uttered, and as courteously received ; and then, as if aware that their

presence must be rather irksome than desirable to the desolate young creature by whose grace and beauty they had been so forcibly impressed, the two gentlemen exchanged a glance of intelligence ; and Mr. Collins respectfully inquired whether Miss Mortimer was prepared for the reading of the will. Gertrude replied, by placing in his hand the sealed packet which had been delivered to her by her uncle ; while the old clerk at the same time deposited upon the table the duplicate which had been committed to his guardianship.

The seals were broken ; and the man of law, already aware of the contents of the parchment, commenced reading, in a calm and clear voice, all those technical preliminaries which betray no trace of what is to succeed ; but as he advanced in his task his accent became slightly animated.

Mr. Owen leant forward in his chair, with an expression of genuine satisfaction upon his mild and benignant countenance ; and the kind-hearted old Jackson, who, during the last few days had learnt to love the orphan as he had never before loved anything on earth, bent his aged head upon his breast, and rubbed his thin hands together, as though his delight were almost irrepressible.

Suddenly, however, he started, and a vivid flush rose to his cheek. He could scarcely credit the evidence of his senses ! And yet it was so—his name had been really mentioned in the will of



his first patron. There could be no mistake ; and the kind and congratulatory smile of his present employer assured the happy old man that he had heard aright.

Then a deep stillness fell upon that narrow room ; and, for a short space, no one cared to disturb the silence. But ere long the genial feelings of the warm-hearted merchant could no longer be controlled, and extending his hand to Gertrude, he said affectionately ; “ My dear young lady, suffer me to be the first to congratulate you. My poor friend could not have disposed more judiciously of a noble fortune. Long may you live both to enjoy and to adorn it.”

“ Very little short of 80,000*l.*, Miss Mortimer ;” said the lawyer with a courteous bow ; “ exclusive of the case of jewels, which your deceased uncle has declared to be contained in a chest in his sleeping-room, and of whose remarkable value I am aware. Give me leave to wish you all happiness in their possession.”

The orphan could only look her thanks ; for, bewildered by an event which had been by her utterly unforeseen, she was greatly and even painfully agitated. To what privations had not her generous relative—for it was thus that she considered his conduct—to what privations had he not submitted, in order to enrich her beyond her wildest hopes ! And he was now in his grave,

beyond the reach of her gratitude ; she could not pour out before him all the warm feelings of her overcharged heart—she could never repay the mighty debt by which she was weighed down.

No thought of her increased importance ; not even a recollection of the opportunity which she should now possess to repay, in so far as wealth could do so, the disinterested affection of Ernest Armstrong, crossed her mind at that moment. She saw only, she remembered only, the squalid bed, the fireless grate, and the comfortless desolation of her uncle's sick room. And he had submitted to all this for her sake, and she could not even tell him what she felt !

“ And you also, Mr. Jackson ;” said his considerate principal, who at once detected the inability of the orphan to sustain a conversation ; “ I very sincerely congratulate you also, Sir. The bequest of Mr. Spencer is honourable to you both. I was well aware that he valued you highly ; and he has now proved it to yourself. A good servant, Sir, will, under all circumstances, as you see, make a good master.”

“ A very pretty little legacy indeed ;” followed up the more matter-of-fact man of law. “ I have seldom been better pleased, Mr. Jackson, than I was when I put that 100%. opposite your name ; for I had known you well for years. This young lady will pardon me, I am sure, for such a confession,

as I had not, at that period, the honour of her acquaintance."

"You could not have rejoiced more than I do, Sir, at such an instance of my uncle's justice;" said Gertrude, for the first time breaking silence, as her warm heart sympathized in the evident happiness of the modest dependant; and once more her hand sought that of the old man who had modestly risen to reply to the flattering expressions of Mr. Owen. "I also owe you much, very much; nor will my claims upon your kindness terminate even here, if I can prevail upon this gentleman to consent to your becoming my escort to my home. May I trust, Sir;" she asked, timidly, as she turned towards the smiling merchant; "that you will indeed spare our old friend to me for a few days? I am quite alone; and so shaken by the trials of the last fortnight, that I fear I should scarcely have courage to encounter the journey under any other escort."

"I am sure, my dear young lady, I may safely pledge myself that Mr. Jackson is at your disposal for whatever period you may require his services;" was the ready reply. "He certainly does not look an objection; and I, as certainly, cannot advance one. But may not I, also, be made useful?—or Mrs. Owen, who would

be proud and happy to receive you until you leave town?"

Gertrude burst into tears. Her spirits were exhausted, and she could scarcely express her acknowledgments. There was no possibility of mistaking the cause of her emotion; and, accordingly, both the gentlemen rose, talked together for a moment of their several engagements; and then, warmly shaking hands with the new-made heiress, left the room, attended by the happy old clerk, who appeared to himself to have suddenly entered upon a new existence, and to have thrown off the weight of at least twenty winters.

He had not closed the door after him as he retreated, and it was fortunate; for when, as the last carriage drove away, he returned to the room, he saw Gertrude upon her knees; and, forthwith, retiring with a noiseless step, he made his way to the kitchen, where, in an emphatic whisper, he related to the wondering and delighted Mrs. Sharp, and her temporary assistants, the marvellous events of the last hour.

Poor old Jackson! He even looked at his threadbare coat with a smile; for if he wore it longer, it would be that such was his good will and pleasure. He need not again shrink before a shower, as he remembered the dilapidation which must ensue to the hat of many winters, that he had so long

fostered ; and then he thought, of his wife, and of her faded Sunday gown ; of his home, with its many wants ; and, finally, overcome by a tide of feeling which had never before been unsealed within his breast, he leant his venerable head upon a table, and wept for very joy.

Life lends us few such tears ; and withered be the hand which would check their flow !

## CHAPTER XVI.

NOTHING could exceed the exultation of Mrs. Mortimer upon finding herself once more in London, and in the midst of the dissipation which she loved. All, save her own gratification and amusement, was again forgotten. Scarcely did she spare a thought to the lonely and now really suffering mother, upon whom the lethargic habits of years were beginning to produce the baneful effect of premature old age. Satisfied that during her absence Mrs. Delamere could still enjoy her well-cushioned chair, her novel, and her ether draughts, Sybil did not care to remember that she was yet susceptible of other gratifications; and the kiss which she had pressed upon her brow when they parted, had been too cold to elicit any demonstration of deeper feeling on the part of the forsaken invalid.

It was only when Frederic affectionately took her hand, and entreated, with an earnestness not to be mistaken, that should she feel herself more dull than she anticipated in her solitude, or that her health required greater care than usual, she would immediately inform him of her wishes, when he would hasten to escort her to town, while Sybil

made the necessary preparations for her reception ; it was only then that the tears gushed into her eyes, and that she was aroused for an instant from her habitual apathy.

She protested, however, and with sincerity, that she could not encounter the fatigue and discomfort of such a journey ; that all she required to recruit her strength was perfect quietude, which the departure of the family would ensure to her ; and that as her existence, under all circumstances, had now for some time been one of estrangement from society, she should not suffer from their temporary absence. With this assurance Mortimer was compelled to satisfy himself, and he did so the more readily that Sybil did not appear to share in his apprehensions. She had been so thoroughly accustomed, and indeed encouraged, by her mother herself, to consider that mother during many years as a mere cypher, that it never occurred to her as just possible that there were duties incumbent upon her which she could not conscientiously neglect.

Thus it was without one feeling of self-reproach or compunction, that she drove away from Westrum, to recommence the existence of expensive folly which alone enabled her to realise her ideas of happiness. Moreover, although she was probably not aware that this consideration greatly added to her eagerness to escape the wearisome monotony of home, Trevor was already established in town ;

nor could she doubt that his time and his services would once more be at her disposal.

Trevor was the fashion ; and fashion was Sybil's idol. It might be, as she shudderingly murmured to herself, the last occasion upon which her influence would be sufficiently powerful over her husband to induce him to renew the career of extravagance in which she had involved him ; and consequently she resolved to fill her cup of enjoyment even to overflowing.

She had already had painful experience that Mortimer was not likely to remain for ever the passive tool which he had hitherto shown himself in her hands. A single interview had sufficed to prove to her that her power was already on the wane ; and therefore, like a skilful general, she determined to use it to the very dregs, while she yet possessed the opportunity.

A single week sufficed to settle the Mortimers once more in London, and to collect about them all their former circle. Sybil's opera-box was such a convenience to her female friends, and Frederic's well-ordered dinners so potent an attraction to his male associates, that day succeeded day in one endless round of pleasure.

There was no leisure for thought ; and even Mortimer himself was no sooner launched for the second time upon the sparkling tide of London life, than he, too, entered upon it with a zest almost equal to that of his brilliant and selfish wife. The



renewed solicitations which he was induced by her persuasions to make in every direction which offered a prospect of success to his diplomatic speculations, rapidly enlarged his circle of acquaintance, and either filled his house with new and equally expensive guests, or withdrew him from it to share in other gaieties equally imprudent.

Mortimer had fallen into the dangerous error of believing in the possibility of an after-retrenchment, which would enable a man who, instead of contenting himself with the income arising from a fine property; lives for a time upon the principal, to redeem his past imprudence. He suffered himself to forget, or at least to disregard, the fact, that he was not merely decreasing the actual amount of his ancestral fortune, but also crippling its future proceeds; or if occasionally some such startling conviction would pertinaciously intrude itself, he made a compromise with his conscience by resolving that this should be the last occasion upon which he would be guilty of the folly.

It is so easy to delay until tomorrow what it is unpalatable to undertake to-day.

Nothing could have been more unfortunate than the rapidly increasing estrangement of Mortimer from his home; and it is probable that one expostulation from Sybil would have awakened him to the fact; but this expostulation was never uttered, and it is doubtful whether she would even

have remarked his constantly-recurring absences, had it not been from the sense of relief which they afforded.

Despite all her pride, she was aware of a certain restraint in the presence of her husband ; for, with all his constitutional weakness, Mortimer was upright in thought and word, and discouraged by the gravity of his demeanour, and even at times by objections still more decided, the witty and envenomed *persiflage* in which she so much delighted ; and by which she revenged herself, as she believed, upon a world that had undervalued her. It was only with Trevor, and individuals of his stamp, that her brilliant sallies and piquant sarcasms were appreciated as she desired ; and thus it was pleasant to see herself surrounded hour after hour in her splendid drawing-room by kindred and applauding spirits.

The relationship of Trevor—a farce which still continued to be enacted, to the secret amusement of many of his friends, who were quite conscious of its fallacy—while it authorized a degree of intimacy which encouraged him in his dishonourable views, tended in no slight degree to lessen the feeling of respect which some among them might still have been induced to concede to herself ; and as he rode with her in the Park, sauntered with her amid the noble shades of Kensington-gardens, or quietly established himself for the evening in her opera-box ; sundry significant smiles were

exchanged by the initiated, which were as full of malice as of meaning.

Still, no word or look had ever escaped Trevor tending to put his victim upon her guard. He had but limed the twig, and he calmly waited to see her entangled through her own free agency. It sufficed him to believe that the moment would come, and that perhaps at no distant period; and meanwhile, he was aware that he was an object of envy to half his acquaintance. The beauty of Sybil was so radiant and queenly in its character, her wit so sparkling, and her fashion so undeniable, that her intimacy was a privilege to be coveted. It mattered little that she had forfeited the esteem of the wise and the virtuous: in the pursuit of mere selfish gratification, men do not require to respect the woman whom they admire; and thus, turn in whatever direction she might, the beautiful and courted Mrs. Mortimer met only smiles and plaudits, and that tacit encouragement which vanity can always invest with words, and second by its own impulsive force.

As time wore on, however, and Trevor felt more secure of his influence, he ventured to try the force of sarcasm. Sybil had already essayed its effect over the mind of her husband, but she believed that she was herself beyond its power.

Nothing renders a woman more blind than her vanity.

"How sure I was;" said Sir Horace, on one occasion when they were *tête-à-tête*—an occurrence which had, moreover, long ceased to be singular—"that all the pretty pastorals with which you favoured me when I visited The Grange, were mere words; very sentimental and picturesque if you will, but still mere words. If I mistake not, you then told me that you were about to marry a country gentleman, and prattled charmingly of his tenants, his local duties, and the delights of a life of rural responsibility and rural leisure. You wanted to persuade me that you were about to become a true Baucis to your rustic Philemon; and you looked daggers because I ventured to hazard a doubt. Now, perhaps, you will do me better justice. Now, perhaps, you will admit that my scepticism was not altogether unfounded. You have been a wife two years, or thereabouts, and I find you once more in town, as devoted to its pleasures as of old, and as able to increase them in your own person."

"The interests of my husband—" commenced Sybil biting her lip.

"*Femme modèle!*" interposed Trevor with a smile; "But hear me out. I knew well that your passion for the world was far from being extinguished; that you were playing a part—Nay, don't frown—unconsciously, perhaps, but still playing a part. And, what then? I am acquainted with so

many charming persons who are doing the same. Pretty women, who have a store of admirable maxims upon their lips, of which they consider it their duty to prove the fallacy upon the first opportunity which offers; that I am not at all likely to blame you. Only, I would have you understand that I was not duped, although too courteous to contend the point."

"So be it;" said Mrs. Mortimer evidently annoyed; "You have no mission from Government, and need not volunteer yourself as the Captain Cook of your acquaintance."

"Why should you be angry?" asked her companion with perfect composure; "Surely one may look back for a year or two without giving offence; especially when, as in your case, the retrospect can afford nothing but pleasure. Do you imagine that I could see you—*you*, Sybil Delamere,—whom I had known courted, followed, and extolled by all that was brilliant in London society, coldly and wilfully settle down into the Lady Bountiful of a country town, and become the victim of a social suttee for the sake of—"

"Spare my husband, if you please;" interposed Sybil, but it was almost with a smile.

"I will—'Hector requires a demi-god to combat;'" said Sir Horaec with quiet insolence; "But to return to yourself. Did you really believe that with all your art you could impose upon me?"

—that you could induce me to suppose that you preferred a shady lane to an opera-box, a back-parlour to a ball-room, or—be it said with all respect—a sighing Strephon to a man of the world? Fie upon you, my fair cousin! For once you undertook a task beyond your strength. I no more believed you than—”

“You believe in our relationship.”

“Oh, excuse me; I have the most perfect faith in all that brings me nearer to you.”

“Pray do not exert yourself to be absurd. A recollection of what it was which necessitated the deception should suffice to keep you silent upon the subject.”

“Oh, Mr. Mortimer’s somewhat precocious jealousy? But surely you are not unjust enough to make me responsible for his weaknesses?”

“Enough, enough;” said Sybil hastily. “Why do you not marry? That is the best step which you could take. You are now at the very apogee of your fashion, and are free to choose where you will.”

“Thank you; I never felt inclined so to forget myself but once, and then——”

“Well, Sir;” said Sybil with a frown, as he paused.

“Why, then, the folly was cured, thanks to you. I felt that my love would not suffice to win the only woman to whom I would willingly have surrendered my liberty; and the abortive trial rendered me wiser.”

"A poor excuse;" said Mrs. Mortimer, resolutely overcoming her confusion; "You must find a better."

"Be it so. I remembered that conjugal love has no wings—that it is 'of the earth, earthy,'—a lingering, grovelling deity of habit, rather than of taste, only fit to surmount the moss-grown pedestal of a cabbage-garden."

"Civil, at least."

"True, if not civil. Come, confess; what can be more monotonous, or, if not monotonous, still worse—what can be more oppressive than such a yoke, padlocked by a priest, riveted by custom, logged by the law; wherein, however you may be separated in spirit, you are chained in fact. I would rather bind day and night together, the roses of June with the snows of January, the fiery falcon with the timid dove — any contrast, however monstrous, for none could be so revolting."

"When you amuse yourself by imagining so extreme a case, all argument is useless."

"Can you confute mine?"

"Perhaps; but I am not in the humour."

"And you are right; it is scarcely worth while to make the experiment when you are forewarned of the result."

"Do you know that you are becoming impertinent?"

“*Tant mieux*—that will put the finishing stroke to my reputation.”

Sybil was silent. What would she not have given to have been free to resent the insolence under which she writhed? But she *dared* not.

And the Rubicon once passed, these conversations were perpetually renewed; until Mrs. Mortimer, already more than half inclined to consider herself a victim, became superlatively convinced of the fact. What had she, as she asked herself, in common with the man to whom she had given her hand? and her vanity readily and promptly answered, “Nothing.” Did she sigh for his society when he was absent, or await with impatience for his return? No! Did she require his counsels? Did she value his affection? Again and again, No! She stood married, as she had stood single, alone! And yet not quite alone; there was another thrall upon her, of which she did not as yet recognise the strength. She believed that she had never been more able to suffice to herself than at the very moment when her weakness was apparent to all around her.

How idly, how carelessly, how unreflectingly, do we all talk of the London season! Of those few months of mummary and madness which absorb the means, and frequently destroy the morals, of after-life;—Of that periodical vortex which too often swallows up prudence, propriety, and good fame



points the finger of scorn at some, and prompts the withering smile of idle and inactive pity at others. And yet those two little words contain a mighty significance; they involve a mighty total, in small things as well as large; they exert a strange, and, it would almost appear, an insurmountable influence. The opportunities of evil, too eagerly rendered available; the small beginnings of error, which, like the grain of mustard-seed sown in a genial soil, are fated to bring forth a many-branched and far-spreading tree, destined to overshadow the soul, and beneath whose boughs the winged vices of society may nestle, and amid whose leaves the thorns of remorse may spring and germinate,—Do they not produce all these?

Let those answer who have reaped remorse, disappointment, and ruin, in the bitter harvest of imprudence and folly.

The embarrassed squire, whose stately dame has dreamed for years that the first season of her pretty daughters in town, if properly managed, must see them at its close, if not marchionesses, at least millionnaires; and who has consequently managed to sink in four short months the savings of as many years—the innocent girl, whose pure heart is sullied by the touch of falsehood, and whose young affections have been made the spoil of heartlessness—the young wife, who panted to see more of the world before she gave up all the best feelings of her heart to home-

happiness, and who returns to that home only to find it cold and dreary, after the unnatural excitement of an admiration and homage which she never should have known:—let these answer!

But what, it may be asked, has this to do with Mrs. Mortimer? She, at least, was no novice in these paths of danger; she brought no unsophistication to lay as a sacrifice upon the altar of the world. And it may be that she did not. But still, even to her, the London season was not without its perils. It absorbed her husband in his own vain and futile pursuits; it left her comparatively free; it gave her opportunities of evil which she might have avoided beneath that husband's ancestral roof. She learned to trust herself, because the very errors of her nature lent her a factitious strength; she learned to overvalue her attractions, because the world stamped them with its showy counterfeit; in a word, she learned to look on life as a mere showy pageant, in which she was called upon to enact a part, and to put forth all her energies in order to render that part striking and brilliant.

Having arrived at this conclusion, she felt how little she was supported in the struggle by the husband whom she had chosen. In the retirement of the country, Mortimer had, to a certain degree, maintained some sort of influence over her mind: she despised, but nevertheless she feared him; weak as he might be, she was compelled to respect

his principles, and to admit his moral worth; but in town he had rapidly degenerated into a mere frivolous man of fashion; and even that character he supported with an awkwardness which was by no means lost upon her. Conscious that he was labouring to effect a purpose, and that all his friendships and courtesies tended to the same end, there was no freedom or spontaneity even in his follies; and he was aware that it was so. Day after day he saw his exertions fail, and his hopes wane; and consequently the worm of disappointment was at the core of all his pleasures. When alone with his wife he was morose, and sometimes bitter; in society he was merely reckless and insignificant.

Here, therefore, the ambition of Sybil found no answering impulse; and thus she retired into herself to gather strength. And for what? She did not know—she never asked herself the question. She only felt that she was like the drowning mariner, who clutches at every passing wave, in the hope that it may bear towards him the life-sustaining plank by whose help he is to accomplish his preservation.

Mephistophiles never murmured a more shrewd whisper into the ear of the devoted Faust than when he suggested the worthlessness of all that he possessed, and the value of all that he had not attained.

## CHAPTER XVII.

THUS were things situated in town when, wearied by the perpetually-recurring dinners at which Mortimer collected all the idle and dissipated men of his set, who had amused themselves by vaunting their interest in the very quarters where he had been so long soliciting the constantly delayed appointment; Sybil, resolved not to be torn for ever from the world in which she delighted, without one brilliant memory, issued, without consulting her husband upon the subject, cards for a ball, in which she determined, moreover, to excel herself.

It is true that her list of female associates was sufficiently limited; but as a stone flung into stagnant water not only creates its own circle, but also produces other radiations beyond, so she at once perceived that she might simultaneously amuse her own friends, and at the same time afford them the opportunity of obliging others. Many a brilliant ball-room is filled by the same device; aye, and crowded. Some attend, as they declare, merely to oblige the person by whom they are bidden; others because they cannot resist pleasure, offer itself in what shape it

may; and others, again, because they are curious to examine an *intérieur* of which they have heard so much, and which they never intend again to invade. Moreover the male portion of the guests was unexceptionable. Men whom every body knew, or wished to know; men of rank, and wit, and fashion; well-looking, well-mannered, and well-bred.

An unlimited order to the most eminent upholsterer of the day, had sufficed to render the really beautiful mansion of Mrs. Mortimer a scene of light and splendour. Turkish tents opening upon miniature gardens, with marble basins flinging up their slender threads of water, which, on rising into the perfumed air, parted in a shower of silver dust, that fell like dew upon costly exotics, and drew out all their perfume; moorish chambers, with their quaintly gilded ornaments and velvet ottomans; a vast conservatory filled with tall tropical plants, and only lighted at intervals by painted Chinese lanterns, which left all in a voluptuous twilight; a ball-room blazing with tapers of pale pink wax; a staircase garlanded with flowers, and bright with festoons of parti-coloured lamps; enormous mirrors, cabinets of buhl, japan, and ormolu; vases of alabaster, burning within their precious cavities the most subtle scents; an orchestra, alike numerous and well-chosen; all, in short, which luxury could invent, or wealth could

purchase, was lavished for one brief evening with unsparing hand.

Probably no one of his guests was half so much impressed by the magnificence of the whole scene as was Mortimer himself. Sybil had skilfully availed herself of his temporary absence from town to accomplish all her plans without the opposition which she foresaw that they would otherwise have experienced; and thus it was not until he entered his own house, after a quiet dinner at his club—which his wife had forewarned him would be impracticable at home—that the extent of her vain imprudence became known to him.

It was, however, too late to expostulate; and, moreover, no where could he find Sybil. He hurried to her favourite boudoir with a cloud upon his brow; but after having with some difficulty found his way there, so thoroughly was the interior of the whole mansion metamorphosed, he only saw himself at the entrance of an Ottoman tent surrounded by a low divan covered with orange-coloured satin, the floor overlaid by a gorgeous carpet, and the walls hung with white persian. More and more disconcerted, he retraced his steps, resolved to shut himself into his own dressing-room until the arrival of the guests should compel him to emerge; but in such a hope he once more deceived himself. On arriving at the threshold he discovered that the door had been

removed, and that the opening was now veiled only by curtains of silk gauze, falling one over the other, and all differing in tint.

Greatly annoyed on finding that even his own peculiar apartment had been invaded—although it need scarcely have been matter of surprise to him had he reflected for an instant, that Sybil, who had suffered such an intrusion into her own, should have been equally unscrupulous as regarded her husband—he thrust the gossamer curtains somewhat roughly aside and entered, in order to satisfy himself to what extent his personal arrangements had suffered from the idle folly of the hour; and he was almost angry to find that, for a moment, his irritation yielded before his astonishment and admiration.

Never, assuredly, was there a prettier conceit. The idea had been Sybil's; and the fashionable artist to whom it had been imparted had worked it out to perfection. It looked like the airy realization of a poet's dream, when he has sunk into slumber with passion in his heart, and a song upon his lips. As the vapoury hangings fell behind the intruder into this nook of fairy-land, no vestige of the entrance could be detected. The whole room, from the centre of the ceiling, (where a winged goddess of burnished silver held in her clasped hands the extremities of all the floating draperies, which, forming one continued iris over

the whole dome of the roof, were ultimately fastened down along its edge by a slender thread of the same glistening metal,) was covered with the transparent folds of the silken cobwebs, which trembled and heaved with every breath as they fell, tier over tier, to the floor, perfectly unconfined; while on the carpet of white velvet, richly painted with groups of scattered roses, stood a table of white marble, whose pedestal was a Cupid crowned with myrtle, trampling upon an hour-glass and a scythe, the whole artistically wrought in silver; as was also the lamp, wreathed with passion-flowers, which, with a few newly-gathered roses, and a couple of feather-fans, shaped like wings, were arranged upon its snowy surface. Two chairs, covered with silver tissue, in the form of conch-shells, were placed beside the table; and this was all. It was evident that no amusement was to be pursued in this unearthly-looking temple save that of conversation.

Mortimer stood for a few moments entranced. He had sufficient poetry in his heart to appreciate the calm, luxurious, dream-like scene before him; and as the ethereal hangings trembled beneath his breath, he forgot for a few brief instants the cost at which they had been so skilfully arranged.

Soon, however, a darker reflection crossed his mind; and the recklessness of Sybil, as it forced itself upon his memory, recalled him to other and



less agreeable sensations. All his warnings, it was now evident, had been unavailing; she was coolly preparing his ultimate ruin, in order to gratify her own weak vanity; and she had, moreover, condescended to take advantage of his absence from his home, to plunge into a vortex of extravagance which she was well aware that he must disapprove, and would have forbidden.

It was consequently with anything rather than a smile that the master of this palace of pleasure, which was still loud with busy voices and hurrying steps, once more emerged from what, despite its beauty, he considered as his desecrated dressing-room; and having with some difficulty succeeded in finding one of his own footmen, was conducted to a small apartment, opening from the servants'-hall, which had been hastily prepared for him.

His valet was soon in attendance; every temporary arrangement had been judiciously made for his comfort; a cheerful fire blazed upon the hearth; and could he have divested himself of all thought of the future, he would soon have recovered his equanimity. But, alas! the most painful reflections are always the most intrusive also; and as he seated himself in his accustomed chair, and took up a book in order to conceal his chagrin while his man gave the last finishing stroke to his preparations, the words danced before his eyes,

and he saw only visions of unpaid bills and enforced mortgages.

Sybil, meanwhile, was radiant with happiness and triumph. She had resolved not to meet her husband until she was protected from his reproaches by the presence of her guests; and thus she had the whole long, glorious night before her. "After which;" she whispered to herself with a smile, as she turned from her looking-glass to examine more minutely than she had yet done the snowy dress which her maid had spread out in all its graceful amplitude upon the bed; "*Adviene que pourra*; the deed will be done; and I shall have shown the envious women who affect to scorn me that they have not indulged their prudery without a sacrifice!"

And for whom and what had the selfish and heartless woman, who thus exulted in her own improvidence, committed so disgraceful a folly? She scarcely knew herself. It is true that her intimates had glibly run over a long list of well-sounding names, and announced to her guests of no common station. But would this promise be fulfilled? Lady Clara was rich in French countesses, baronesses, and marchionesses; Mrs. Lamerly engaged herself for sundry German Gräffinnen and Italian duchesse; Mrs. Babington was strong in Spanish donnas, and Iberian fidalgos;

and, better than all, the diplomatist's widow had giddily pledged herself for a foreign ambassadress.

As regarded the male portion of her guests, Sybil had no anxiety. She knew her power. She had but to make a sign, and she was aware that she should be obeyed. Were her friends only faithful and zealous, therefore, her proudest ambition would be realised; but, nevertheless, there were moments in which a feeling of anxiety, for which she scorned herself, made her tremble in spite of all her self-possession.

How laughable would it be, were it not so degrading a jest, to analyse the real amount of gratification to be derived by the mistress of a stately mansion, on seeing her spacious saloons filled by a glittering crowd to whom she is utterly unknown; and on hearing, in her very presence, the insolent criticisms of those who have thronged her rooms to feast and to revel at her expense. The actual pleasure which she experiences on being presented to one of these highborn, and hitherto unknown guests, from the impertinent stare and scarcely perceptible bend with which her identity is recognised; or by the total indifference with which, when they are wearied of the pleasure that she has gratuitously afforded them, they depart one after the other, reminding their personal friends of their common engagements, making social arrangements among themselves, and finally sweeping

down the illuminated staircase to their carriages, without even the courtesy of a parting salutation to their exhausted hostess.

And it was to secure so questionable a triumph, and so equivocal a gratification as this, that the proud Sybil had subjected herself to possible mortification, and her husband to inevitable embarrassment;—to parade her vanity for a few hours in all its panoply of luxury and recklessness; and to be the theme of gossip for a week. Yes, even so it was; this had been her empty and paltry day-dream from the very period of her marriage; and, despite her occasional misgivings, her heart beat high, and her cheek flushed with excitement.

Even little Eva was forgotten, and not once, during that busy day, did she even see her mother. But what then? Had not that mother been fully engaged in her domestic duties? Had she not unweariedly superintended every arrangement, and regulated every movement of the anxious and noisy crowd by which her house was invaded? Certain it is, that as the last lamp was lighted, the last workman dismissed, and she stood before her Psyche in a snowy dress of white crape, looped with clusters of the wild apple-bloom, and her high smooth brow cinctured by a garland of the same graceful blossoms, no feeling of compunction for any duty unfulfilled dimmed the lustre of her eyes, or blenched the glow upon her cheek.

It was fortunate for the poor child, whose loving heart was already susceptible of neglect, that Mortimer even amid his annoyance and anxiety, had been more considerate; and he could have chosen no better antidote to his exasperated feelings than the visit which he paid to the nursery before he commenced his toilette for the evening. Eva was asleep when he entered, and tears were hanging upon her long eyelashes. As he bent over her, she looked like a cherub which had wept itself to rest over the follies of the world.

"Miss Eva has been crying for you and her mamma, Sir;" said Mrs. Harris officiously, as she heard her master sigh on detecting the tell-tale tears; "I thought I should never have got her to sleep. However, she is fast enough now; and it will be all right when she wakes to-morrow."

"And did not Mrs. Mortimer see her this evening?" asked Frederic in an unsteady accent; "not see her for a moment before she was put to bed?"

"Laws, no, Sir; my mistress hasn't had a moment of time all day. Poor, dear lady, such a deal as she has had to look after! No wonder, Sir, that she couldn't come up stairs to Miss Eva, for she hasn't even had her drive."

"That is conclusive;" said Mortimer with a bitter smile.

"In course, Sir;" was the ready reply; "and I tried to explain this to the dear child, but she is too young yet to understand such things."

"Probably."

"And so, poor dear, she would fret; but, as I said before, Sir, she'll be all right to-morrow."

"I wonder;" murmured Mortimer to himself; "whether the dreams of children of this tender age are troubled by the sorrows of the day."

"That they are, Sir, for sure;" exclaimed the quick-eared nurse; "only to hear how Miss Eva has sighed in her sleep to-night, you would know it directly."

"Ha!" said the fond father with a start; "then she shall have no more such dreams. Eva! My darling! Will you awake, and bid good-night to papa?"

The little girl opened her large blue eyes; gazed for a moment around her, bewildered by the glare of the candles, then smiled, and extended her dimpled arms to her father. Mortimer caught her to his breast; but, as he clasped her, a sudden revulsion of feeling came over the only half-awakened child, and she burst into a passionate fit of grief.

"Papa, dear papa;" were the only articulate sounds which she uttered amid her sobs, but they were all that the heart of Sybil's husband coveted at that moment. His child loved him—clung to

him—wept over his absence—joyed at his approach. Life was not yet a blank. He forgot his gilded saloons, his vanished hopes, his gnawing anxieties; and, in five minutes, he was deep in play, with the now happy Eva upon his knee, smoothing down her glossy curls, and sunning himself in her large eager eyes.

An hour passed by; and as the child had betrayed no symptom of weariness, Mortimer still lent himself to all her pretty caprices, and listened with delight to her clear joyous laughter. It might be a weakness thus to lose all memory of the pomp and pageantry which awaited him below stairs; but certain it is, that he had never bestowed a thought upon the matter, until a discreet signal at the door warned him of the presence of his valet, who respectfully suggested the necessity of his not further delaying the duties of his toilette. Eva pouted, but she no longer wept. When her father replaced her in her little bed, she obediently withdrew her clinging arms from his neck; and with a last low-murmured “Dear papa!” and a long, long kiss, suffered him to leave her.

Ere long, carriage after carriage drove to the door, and deposited a bevy of pretty women and fashionable idlers in the illuminated hall. The rooms filled rapidly: and as Sybil stood near the entrance of the principal saloon, and received her guests with the high-bred self-possession for which

she was remarkable, many a haughty eye rested upon her for an instant in wondering curiosity. For the moment she had disarmed criticism. The elegant simplicity of her dress, rendered the more conspicuous by the magnificence with which she was surrounded, astonished those who came to smile or to sneer at the *parvenue* who filled her rooms by the agency of her acquaintance; for it was evident at once that Mrs. Mortimer was no novice. There was even an affectation of indifference to the comments of all around her in the studied plainness of her attire, to which no single ornament of any description had been appended; and a consciousness in her whole deportment of the uselessness of such adjuncts to heighten her superlative beauty, which betrayed the perfect woman of the world, careless or disdainful of the empty sarcasms of the impertinent.

Surprise followed upon surprise. No incongruity was perceptible in the splendour of her princely saloons; no paltry expedients, no ignorant deficiencies, could be detected; all was perfect; and a low murmur of admiration, reluctantly extorted, and therefore the better appreciated, ere long met her ear on all sides. Noble and sonorous names were declaimed in her ear; jewels flashed, and feathers waved before her eyes; that sweet and subtle perfume with which a crowd of fair and fashionable women always freight the atmosphere



about them, mingled deliciously with the breathings of flowers and the steam of costly essences;—and still Sybil remained calm and unmoved; no heightened colour flushed over her cheek, no triumphant light danced in her large dark eyes. She was only realising the vision of years, and not a pulse quickened as her smile greeted each new arrival.

At length her first duty was fulfilled; the strains of music were audible from the ball-room; the confusion had in some degree disentangled itself: there were groups of talkers, solitary gazers, smiling couples established upon sofas in confidential *tête-à-tête*; gray-headed nobles and over-dressed matrons established at the card-tables; in short, the skein was unravelled; and Sybil had time and opportunity to think only of herself.

Some scores of her guests had no sooner made their bow to their hostess upon the threshold, than they had utterly forgotten “what manner of woman” she was; and among these were mothers, who had brought their young and beautiful daughters under a strange roof, simply because they knew that there they would meet once more with a timid or undecided admirer, and that as the season was drawing to its close, every opportunity of collision had consequently become tenfold more desirable; young wives, weary of home, and greedy of admiration; and fair girls whose heart beat

high and whose eyes sought the floor, at every name which was announced, while caring only to distinguish one.

To these, and such as these, the donor of the *fête* was a personage too unimportant to occupy their thoughts beyond a moment. They had deeper, or at least more personal, interests; and thus, as Sybil glided through her costly rooms, she did not escape the penalty of her weakness.

"What improvidence!" said a portly old lady, beside whose chair she was compelled to pause for a moment, the pressure of the throng rendering it impossible for her to advance; "And I understand these people are nobodies! It is really a practical impertinence. What would they say to this in your *belle France, Madame la Baronne?*"

"*Ma foi, ma chère;*" replied a small, meagre, copper-coloured figure beside her, as she inhaled a huge pinch of snuff from an enamelled and diamond-studded box; "It is only your own England of liberty which can show such anomalies as this. *Le cher Empereur* was *roturier* enough in one sense; but even then, in order to elbow *nous autres* so familiarly, it was needful to be a *célébrité* of some sort. *Noblesse de robe*, or *d'épée*, or *artiste*, or something more than a mere *rentier*; *Ah, bah!* the good old days are over."

With some difficulty Sybil at last passed on.

"But should I be presented to Mrs. Mortimer,

mamma;" said a lovely girl deprecatingly, as the hostess was once more stopped by the broad shoulders and jewelled turban of a voluminous dowager; "What am I to do?"

"Be civil, Honoria, of course; but no more. You did not come here to form an acquaintance with this person, but to meet Lord Alfred. Once for all I tell you, child, that there is some strange story about her; and that is enough. All that you have to do is to remember why I brought you here, and to make a better use of the opportunity than you have done of others which I have given you. Recollect that this is your second season."

Once more Sybil moved on.

"And Saviatti really told you this story, and vouched for it?" were the next articulate sounds which met her ear, as, partially concealed by the draperies of a window, she stood behind a group of young men. "Upon my conscience, the jest is a good one! And so Trevor was done?"

"Aye, thoroughly; but he only lost his money. What say you to the simple Damon who, like a silly sheep as he was, stepped into the breach?"

There was a light, mocking chorus of laughter.

"Nevertheless, she is a monstrous fine woman;" remarked one of the party.

"Glorious!" was the ready response; "Incomparable for a wife *à la Régence*; but ——"

"Suffer me to pass, gentlemen;" said Sybil

haughtily, as she emerged from her concealment, and stood before them. "My duties as a hostess compel me to disturb your conversation."

A general, but silent bow succeeded; and, as the group made way, Mrs. Mortimer passed through it with the air of an empress.

Her comparative solitude was, however, now over; and even although her spirit burnt within her at the insults to which she had been subjected, she was too thoroughly mistress of her emotion to suffer one trace of displeasure to become apparent.

And still the revel progressed; the lights shone brightly; the music swept like speaking odours through the vast apartments; fond vows, and many false as fond, were whispered in the dim conservatory; hundreds exchanged owners at the card-tables; the luxurious supper-room was perpetually filled and emptied of its votaries; and daylight at length struggled to penetrate through the satin folds of the jealous curtains.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

MORTIMER had staked and lost heavily. He dreamt for several hours that he had found a counter-influence to that of his wife: but he deceived himself; her eyes had never beguiled him more surely to his ruin than did the cards that night. Eager to forget, and equally eager to enjoy, he had readily fallen into a snare; and surrounded by a bevy of his friends—those friends who are ever ready to fool to the top of his bent *l'Amphytrion o l'ou dine*—he had, after a score of desperate plunges, become their prey.

In vain did his brow burn, and his eye flash. Upon whom could he revenge his defeat? Those about him were all honourable men: a shade or two more skilful, perhaps, than himself, with the cards and the dice-box, but still honourable men, and above suspicion.

Eva was asleep in her little bed above stairs—asleep, with a happy smile upon her lips. Occasionally, as a louder strain than usual burst from the orchestra, and came sighing along the staircases and passages, even to the remote nursery whose door had been flung back by the under-

nurse during the absence of Mrs. Harris, (who had abandoned her charge in order to secure her share in the dissipation of the housekeeper's room,) and stole, like a wandering spirit, to the snow-curtained couch of the slumbering cherub, she stretched forth her dimpled arms in a pleasant dream; and murmuring, "Papa, dear papa;" again sank to rest.

Sybil had left the ball-room on the arm of Sir Horace Trevor, and was listening with delight to the enthusiastic encomiums which he lavished upon her taste, and the perfect harmony of all her arrangements. It soothed her to hear that by one at least of her guests she was appreciated; but the one spot of flame still burned and festered upon her spirit. No, she had not revenged herself upon a world that she despised. Even beneath her own stately roof, among the flowers that she had wreathed, the luxury that she had created, the harmony that she had invoked, she knew that the world which she had resolved to subjugate paid her back scorn for scorn; but this conviction had not humbled her, it had only made her desperate.

"Wealth is a wizard;" she answered, with a contemptuous smile, to one of his remarks. "The wife of a soap-boiler could have done all this, aye, and more, had her resources served her;—but come this way, and I believe that I can show you something which no mere gold could have created;"

and as she spoke she led him towards the gauze-screened cabinet which has been already described.

“Just as I could have wished;” she said, rather speaking to herself than addressing her companion; “The giddy fools have not hitherto discovered this retreat; and yet it is the pearl of the huge oyster which I have opened for their amusement. What say you to this fairy-nook, Sir Horace?”

“What can I say?” murmured Trevor after a momentary pause, during which his quick eye had glanced from floor to ceiling; “What can I say?” he repeated as they advanced towards the table, followed in their progress by a moving vapour of gauze, which floated above and about them, as the tinted clouds undulate beneath the beams of the setting sun; “save that the shrine is worthy of the goddess?”

Sybil smiled as she took possession of one of the vacant chairs, while Trevor established himself in the other, after having drawn it to her side.

“Nothing can be more poetical, more dream-like;” he pursued, lifting one of the light fans from the table: “Why should it be but the mere vision of a night, to be subjected tomorrow to the rude hands of hirelings, and desecrated by vulgar intrusion?”

“Learn like me;” said his companion; “to live in the present; and to leave the future to its own developments. Do you know, Trevor, that

the consciousness that *you* would appreciate this graceful phantasy sufficed to me, and I cared little though it should be overlooked, as you see it has been, by the soulless beings who have passed it by to bask in light, and to bewilder themselves by noise."

As she ceased speaking, Sybil turned with one of her most radiant looks towards her listener. She anticipated some acknowledgment, but for a moment he made no reply; his eyes were riveted upon the pretty plaything, composed of marabouts, and dusted with silver, which he was twirling in his hand.

The silence was only temporary, however; and it was abruptly broken.

"Sybil;" murmured the baronet without changing his position, or abstaining from his inconsequent occupation; "I had no idea that Mortimer had either taste or nerve for high play."

"And has he?" asked the worldly wife in an accent of the most supreme indifference.

"His prowess of to-night would seem to imply as much. When I left the card-room he was a heavy loser."

"He should not have ventured beyond his depth;" was the quiet retort; and the words once uttered, Sybil began, in her turn, to amuse herself by collecting and clustering the scattered roses which were strewn over the table.



Trevor glanced at her as she leant forward ; and never had he thought her so beautiful. The opaque white of her dress contrasted in a striking manner with the glistening silver of the chair on which she sat. A slight languor, the result alike of physical fatigue and concealed mortification, hung upon her eyelids, and softened the whole expression of her face. Her very movements were subdued. The moment, as he felt, was propitious.

"Mortimer was rash, at such a time, and in such company, to tempt fortune ;" he continued, as he drew one of the roses from her hand, and after pressing it to his lips, placed it in his bosom ; "But some men are fated to commence every undertaking with the left hand. If you do not exert your influence he will soon undermine his fortune."

"What if no such influence existed ?"

"*Conte des fées*—Impossible !"

Sybil playfully shook her head.

"Is not the man human ?"

"Very—I must not suffer you to wrong him even by a doubt. "Does he not live ? breathe ? move ? frequent his clubs ? and pay his tradesmen's bills ?"

"But should the ruin come, Sybil ?"

"Once more, I say, leave the future to its own resources. Where do you spend the summer ?"

"In Italy, or—at Westrum."

"Oh, not at Westrum;" exclaimed Mrs. Mortimer, startled out of her habitual composure; "we are to have *maison close* during the next nine months."

"Then, decidedly, it must be Italy."

"And who are your party?"

"I am weary of joint-stock tours, where the sum-total is composed of insignificant units. I covet a single companion, and will admit no more."

"Be wary, then;" said Sybil, almost with a sigh; "You do not know the misery of an ill-chosen and enforced companionship with one solitary individual."

"I can imagine it."

"No doubt;" was the rejoinder, as the eyes of Trevor flashed with a sudden light; "But imagination is not experience."

"I shall not tempt that experience. I shall act upon sure grounds."

"We are all wise in our own conceit."

"I know it; but the wisdom rarely extends itself beyond that conceit. I will be wiser."

"But why leave England, where you have so many resources?"

"Because I am sick of the folly and selfishness of all about me. I have lived for pleasure long enough, and will henceforward live only for happiness"

"Then, after all your disclaimers, you are really going to marry!"

"You are epigrammatic, Mrs. Mortimer."

"But is it not so?"

"And what if it were?"

"You will make a bad husband, Trevor."

"Do you think so?"

"I am sure of it."

"And why?"

"Because you detest coercion; and were you mated with an angel, you would quarrel with her wings because she had allowed you to clip them."

"Well, perhaps you are right;" conceded Sir Horace, fixing his eyes steadily upon her face; "perhaps I might despise her, when I remembered that she had weakly resigned the beautiful and glorious prerogative of freedom, and meanly chained herself to the steps of the altar on which she should have towered as the idol; that she had, from a mere puerile clinging to the conventions of a society which possessed no right—and perhaps as little inclination—to dictate her actions, tamely scattered upon the earth the leaves of the roses with which she should have crowned herself."

"You justify yourself like a libertine."

"The word is sufficiently comprehensive at all events."

"Is it not applicable? What can I understand

but that you contemplate the companionship of a mistress?"

"You take strange liberties with our barbarous vernacular to-night, fair Sybil. However, in one sense, I admit the term, unpoetical as it is. Yes, the partner of my wanderings beneath the blue skies and flowery bowers of Italy, and wheresoever else her good pleasure may direct my footsteps, even though it should be beyond the cataracts of the Nile, or to the sandy deserts of mysterious Africa, shall indeed be the very mistress of my soul—the supreme sovereign of my destiny. I will have no will, no wish, no existence, save in her."

"Beware of such utter self-abnegation; she may deceive you."

"I have no such fear; I am fore-armed."

"By what occult power?"

"By my love—my claim—my—I will echo your own words—my perfect self-abnegation. I could have no better safeguard."

"You are a happy man, even in your voluntary delusion."

"Pardon me; I am not deluded—or—should it indeed be so Sybil—"

Mrs. Mortimer started, and her cheek burned. She turned away; she would have spoken, but she could not control her voice.

"Listen to me, Sybil;" said Sir Horace gaining courage from her visible confusion; and as he

spoke he grasped her hand, and retained it despite her struggle to free herself from the clasp ; “ You are not happy. Remember you are not the acquaintance of yesterday, and that our hearts spoke audibly years ago. I love you—I know all the paltry and pitiful restraints of your present position. To-night you are the queen of a brilliant circle—the admired and the envied mistress of a fairy palace ; but the night, wiredraw it as you may, can only last some three hours longer ; and then comes tomorrow—tomorrow with an irritated and reproachful husband, who, forgetting his own imprudence at the gaming-table, will visit upon you the results of an improvidence to which his fortune is by no means adequate. Look at the floating of the light draperies which are heaving about you as you struggle to escape my hold ; tomorrow the hammer of the workman, a few nails withdrawn, and a few sturdy blows, will reduce all their gracefulness into a heap of rags. You will be once more alone with an angry and resentful husband, in a noisy and ungenial home ; and after that—for more remains behind, Sybil—after that you have a long and dreary perspective before you, to which you cannot, you *shall* not tamely yield. Westrum, with, as you have already confessed, closed doors ; a dreaming mother, and a sulking husband ! And is this to be the end of

all, Sybil? Was it to fulfil such a destiny as this that Nature made you a mark for admiration and worship? That you were gifted with talents that dazzle, with a wit that fascinates, and with a mind which can appreciate and sympathise with all that is grand and beautiful?"

"Enough, Sir Horace; enough."

"Yet must you hear more;" relentlessly pursued her tempter; "for I have resolved to convince your reason. For what, and why, do you willingly and wilfully bow your proud neck to such a yoke? To gratify the prejudices of an exacting and misjudging world? Fie upon such mere womanly weakness! Where are your obligations to this world which you would elevate into a censor? Nature, nature has been your benefactress; it is her, and her alone, to whom you owe allegiance: the world has to you been only a stepdame, or you would not be to-day the wife of Mortimer—of a man who cannot comprehend you; but who wears you as the ignorant *parvenue* wears her diamond necklace—not with an appreciation of its real brilliancy, but with a vulgar consciousness that it is an object of envy. What have the refined and town-bred Sybil Delamere and the country squire, whose soul is in his acres—what have they, I ask, what *can* they have, in common? As yet you have blinded yourself to this truth, for as yet you have

not been utterly flung upon his insignificance for companionship and sympathy; he has left the reins loose, and the bit has not galled you; but you are already warned that the scene and the system are both about to change."

"Sir Horace, I will hear no more."

"Only one last appeal—Sybil, divine Sybil! Be at last just to yourself. You once loved me; and there are yet moments in which I fancy that I can detect some evidence that you love me still. I offer to you the devotion of a life; the resources of an ample fortune; an existence of splendour and indulgence; the undying fervour of a passion which you alone have been able to awaken—Sybil, do I, indeed, plead in vain?"

Mrs. Mortimer strove to rise; but her companion was already kneeling beside her, and his grasp was strong upon her dress.

"Are you not aware, Sir?" she asked, with flashing eyes; "that you are urging me to dishonour?"

"Sybil;" murmured Sir Horace; "your ear is quick, and your eye keen; has not the revel of to-night, held in your own saloons, provided by your own gold, created by your own taste, taught you to despise so poor a chimera? There are noble dames yonder, rustling their satins, waving their plumes, and parading their magnificent nothingness—but is one of them at your side?"

Has one of them claimed companionship with you? Have you met respect, or even consideration, from one of the haughty eyes which have fastened admiringly upon the gaudy toys that you have scattered in their path? Are you not aware that among the glittering mob which you have collected about you there are friends of Saviatti, and that Saviatti is—”

“A fiend! a demon!” fiercely exclaimed Sybil.

“You help my argument;” was the rapid rejoinder; “and, as such, the less scrupulous. You have the effects of his idle indiscretion before you. And, mark me, Sybil—Mortimer, weak as he may be on other points, is sensitive and jealous of his honour! A husband—the fact is proverbial—may be, and generally is, the last to hear that by which he is the most closely affected; but, trust me, he is eventually enlightened. Do you comprehend your position now, my adored Sybil? And do you believe that, loving you as I do, I can coldly abandon you to such a fate?”

“Trevor;” whispered Mrs. Mortimer hoarsely, as her head sank upon her bosom; “you are unmerciful!”

Sir Horace still knelt before her, and was about to soothe the wounded dignity which he had so relentlessly excited, when the vapoury curtain was thrust aside, and the baby face of Mrs. Lamerly protruded like some frightful vision through the



opening. A slight shriek escaped her lips, as she suffered the light folds of the gauze to float back into their places; and then succeeded a ringing laugh, as her lisping voice was heard exclaiming imperiously—"No, no; you shall not move a step further! It is the prettiest place you ever saw in your life; all white and silver, like a moon among the clouds; but you shall not see it. We should all be *de trop*; for Mrs. Mortimer is there with Sir Horace Trevor; and I think they are rehearsing a tragedy, or a comedy, or something of that sort; for he is on his knees, and she looks—but, upon my honour, I scarcely know how she looks!—it would have been so indiscreet to intrude longer."

Then followed a deep silence, broken only by the sound of retreating footsteps; and the agonized ear of Sybil detected that they were those of several individuals. The thickly-piled carpets soon muffled that light sound; and then all was still as the grave.

"Sir Horace Trevor;" said Mrs. Mortimer as she rose from her seat, ghastly pale, and with a quivering lip; "You have bought me at a fearful price! Leave me now. We shall meet again."

"To-morrow, Sybil?"

She coldly bent her head in token of acquiescence.

"Farewell, then, till to-morrow." He hastily raised her cold fingers to his lips, drew back the curtains of the door, and disappeared.

A wild and acrid smile convulsed the features of Sybil for an instant; and she clasped her forehead in her spread hands, as if to deaden the throbbing of her burning temples. One word, and one only, escaped her as she stood there—the word, “Eva!” and she pronounced it with a shudder which shook her whole frame, and a gasp that seemed to threaten her for an instant with suffocation.

It was the last whisper of her guardian angel ere it took flight for ever; and she had echoed it involuntarily.

But even amid her anguish the proud spirit of Mrs. Mortimer scorned to bend; and after a severe struggle she succeeded in subduing every vestige of emotion, and with a steady step and a proud eye returned to her guests. She saw Mrs. Lamerly surrounded by a group of curious listeners, who were all too earnest in their attention to detect her approach; and towards them she firmly made her way.

“Why are you not dancing, Amabel?” she inquired with perfect composure, as she reached her side.

The diplomatist’s widow started, flushed, and stammered out with some difficulty; “I am fatigued, Mrs. Mortimer.”

“Mrs. Mortimer!” echoed Sybil, raising her eyebrows in affected and playful surprise: “Why, Amabel, you are ceremonious to-night. Remember that you are in a simple English drawing-room,

and not in the court circle of your dear friend, the Margrave."

"I do not understand—" faltered the widow.

"What I understand, *ma chère*;" broke in a little German Gräfine, who had been one of her listeners; "is, that you have betrayed me; and you know the proverb, *Wie gesät, so geschnitten*. I shall not expect you to-morrow evening. Good night." And, with a haughty and indignant bow, the ruffled beauty swept from the room.

"As she pleases;" said Mrs. Lamerley, with a pout; "but I could quote, if I pleased, the old saying about glass windows and throwing stones. However, my turn will come."

Sybil turned away with a haughty mien, but her very soul was sick within her. She had heard and understood all. There were other demons in the world besides Saviatti; and how she began to hate and scorn that world! Trevor was right; and she would trample it even to the dust.

Her rooms emptied rapidly. The lights were beginning to fail; the musicians were putting up their instruments; group after group passed her by, on their way out, without one token of observance or recognition. At length the very link-boys dispersed—the revel was over: and Sybil was left amid the relics of her brief splendour utterly alone—alone with her hopes, her fears, her stifled passion, and her corroding thoughts.

## CHAPTER XIX.

THE morrow came, and with it all the discomforts usual under such circumstances. Sybil had paced her room until wearied nature in its turn overcame mental disquietude; and throughout her vigil the perpetual coming and going of the servants, who had abandoned all idea of seeking their beds at so undue an hour, and under such an accumulation of duties, had fallen upon her ear utterly unheeded. What were to her the sounds of the external world, when there echoed amid the depths of her spirit the hoarse and sullen reverberations of a more personal and absorbing agitation? She had not seen Mortimer after the departure of her guests; the avoidance had been mutual; for both had within themselves a consciousness of error to be concealed, and of weakness to be expiated.

Frederic had retired to his room, angered, repentant, and reflective; Sybil had sought hers fevered, undecided, and nevertheless desperate. The husband, boldly looking into the future, although with a sick heart and a stricken spirit, had passed his time in hasty and imperfect calcu-

lations, and those vague, but passionate resolutions of future prudence which, like snow-flakes in the moon-light, show so substantial and so brilliant, but which require only one touch of heat to annihilate them altogether ; the wife had sought solitude to brood over the past, to deprecate the present, and to defy the future. She was aware that previous improvidence, first counselled, and ultimately encouraged and augmented by herself, had stricken deeply at the root of her husband's prosperity. It was true that the extravagance of a couple of seasons could not ruin Mortimer ; but she was aware that it had sufficed to embarrass his movements and to cripple his resources. Sybil had always loathed and despised all monetary considerations ; and she felt that she could never brook his justifiable, but nevertheless wearisome, reproaches upon such a subject. If she had sought to become his wife, it had been from no blind attachment to himself, but in order to regain, through his means, the social station which she had forfeited by her own levity, and to share with him the affluence without which she considered life to be but a mere mean and paltry game, to be played out to the end only by mean and paltry spirits.

And all this purpose had failed : she was still a mark for the insolent comments of the proud and the scornful. The memories of the past, like the

stones cast behind them by the twin heroes of the mythology, sprang to life, armed, and ready to do battle; but it was against herself. The gold which she had lavished to purchase at least a temporary triumph, had melted as she scattered it around her, and scorched the hand that poured it forth.

And what remained?

Sybil had dismissed her attendant. It seemed to her as though every eye could read her secret; and as her thoughts fastened upon her last interview with Trevor, she thrust back the dark braids from her forehead, for even their light and accustomed pressure appeared to weigh her down; and then, rising from her chair, flung open one of the windows in order to breathe more freely.

There is always something awful in the return of a new day: in the doubtful light which creeps almost reluctantly across the sky, as though it feared to hasten on a mission which condemned it to look for so many hours upon scenes of error and of crime. To the virtuous and the pure there is a sublimity in its stealthy progress; but to the erring and the guilty its charm is lost; to them there is a sad reproach in its silent advent; and it is the hour of all others the most difficult to fill with purely selfish thought. Even Sybil, as she bared her brow to the chill wind that heaved the curtains behind which she stood, and looked out upon the

desolate garden of the square, where the night-dews still hung upon the branches of the stunted shrubs, and the dense vapours were rolling off in folds of dull yellow and murky brown, was not altogether unaffected by its influence.

Where were now the light and the revelry in which her soul delighted? Where were now the glance of admiration and the words of passion which to her were as the dayspring of her existence? She stood upon the dull and mysterious tomb of the past; upon the vague and shapeless threshold of the future; and both were alike, "without form, and void." She heard only the low moaning of the cheerless wind; she saw only the gloomy awakening of a new day, disturbed by the occasional footstep of one of those rude sons or daughters of toil who never calculate time save as a mean of gain, or of those still more enslaved victims of vice, who feel that their task is ended when that of virtuous poverty begins.

Sybil closed the window abruptly, and threw herself upon the bed. Body and mind were both exhausted; and at length she sank to sleep.

Did she dream of the husband who, much as he was injured, still confided in her truth? Of the child to whom her own good name would be the best and the meetest heritage? Of the man who wronged, deceived, and almost forgotten, once more pursued her with words of passion and of

promise? No; she dreamt of none of these things. Her heavy head pressed the pillow like a thing of stone. Her sleep was as the sleep of death; the condemned felon, whose rest is to be broken on the morrow by the gibbet and the rope, sleeps this deep and mysterious slumber; the waveworn mariner on the raft, the only link between him and eternity; the soldier in his bivouac on the eve of battle;—all, in short, whose nerves have been braced to the uttermost for hours, and who suddenly find themselves alone, and unsupported by the pride which has sustained them beneath the gaze of their fellow men, have experienced the same deep, and dreamless, and death-like sleep; save, perhaps, the coward, whose fears for the morrow keep him waking; but Sybil was no coward. She had suffered, and she slept.

It was long past mid-day when her maid ventured to enter her apartment; and her rest was so deep, despite her undrawn curtains, and the disorder in which she had flung herself upon her bed, that for a few seconds the woman looked upon her almost in terror. Her long hair fell like a shower of jet over her face and shoulders, her hands were tightly clasped together, and there was an expression of suppressed but terrible agony upon her countenance that mere physical fatigue could not have impressed there.

No wonder, therefore, that, forgetful of the



reprimand which her unbidden officiousness might draw down upon her, the terrified Abigail ventured to awake her.

"Ha! is it morning so soon?" murmured out Sybil, who had started from her sleep at the first whisper.

"I beg your pardon, Ma'am;" was the respectful reply; "but it is now nearly two o'clock. My master has been out for the last three hours, and desired me to say that he should not return home until the evening. Miss Eva has had her walk; and Mrs. Harris wishes to know if you will see her before dinner-time."

"No, no;" said Sybil hoarsely and hurriedly; "I am too much fatigued. There—look!—upon the dressing-table you will find a locket, hung to a small gold chain. You know the one I mean—with my hair in it, at the back of her father's portrait. Tell Mrs. Harris to give it to her with my love, and to let her wear it till I see her again. Is there anything new?—letters, or——"

"No, Ma'am; only Sir Horace Trevor has been here; but when he found that my master was out, and that you were not up, he left word that he would call again at two o'clock, as he wished to see you, Ma'am, on some particular business; and so I made free to come into your room."

"You did right, Symonds, perfectly right;" said Sybil with a slight shudder, as she partially

raised herself, and, sweeping back her dishevelled hair, leant her head upon her hand. "And now come here, Symonds; here, close to my pillow. Can I trust you?"

"Try me, Ma'am;" said the woman stolidly.

"You must have seen that I am not happy;" commenced Sybil, fixing her eyes steadily upon her attendant.

The Abigail shrugged her shoulders.

"You were with me when I married?"

There was a sign of assent.

"I did wrong;" pursued the once haughty mistress after a short pause; "I mistook Mr. Mortimer, and it is probable that he misunderstood me. Things cannot go on thus, Symonds."

"Of course not, Ma'am."

"It is possible that I may travel before long. Are you willing to accompany me?"

"Do you take Miss Eva, Ma'am? I can't undertake to travel with children; it's out of my line."

The mother for a moment conquered the woman of the world, and Mrs. Mortimer turned aside to avoid the fixed gaze of her hired menial; but in spirit she had passed the Rubicon, and she rallied on the instant.

"No;" she said, with some effort; "I go alone."

"Alone, Ma'am?"

"That is, neither your master nor Miss Eva will accompany me."

"I see, Ma'am;" was the reply, uttered with one of those intelligently-confidential smiles which are the first-fruits of error to a proud spirit. "I am quite at your service, and ready to go wherever you please. But you are forgetting the time, Ma'am. If Sir Horace Trevor should be here before you are dressed, is he to wait, or to come again?"

"Let him wait;" said Sybil, with the superb expression of disdain by which the haughty lip so frequently conceals the secret of the quailing heart. "He is, probably, not in haste."

The Abigail pursed up her mouth. Had her mistress given her a printed book to read, knowing that mistress as she did, she could not have guessed the truth more thoroughly.

"Sir Horace was quite put out, Ma'am, when he found that you were not up;" she ventured to remark, as she placed the velvet slippers beside the bed.

"Indeed!" said Sybil, with affected indifference.

"And then, Ma'am, he inquired for my master, and I told him that he was gone out for the day."

"You told him so?"

"Yes, ma'am; did I do wrong?"

"Oh, no, no! it is a matter of no consequence."

By the bye, Symonds, you will not mention to any one that I think of leaving England."

"Of course not, Ma'am, if you wish it."

"I do, Symonds, and I believe that I can trust you. Is my bath ready?"

The first scene in the drama of guilt was played out, and Sybil felt that she was in the power of her own salaried dependant.

Sir Horace Trevor was once more beneath her roof long before Sybil left her room. He knew the spirit with which he had to deal; and he felt that the ball of the preceding evening had served him well. Her pride had been galled; and sufficient time had not yet elapsed for her to recover from the mortification she had experienced. To profit by a vulgar but expressive phrase, the iron was still hot, and he was too good a tactitian to suffer it to cool. Rejected by the world, and estranged from her husband, he offered her a refuge from daily increasing annoyance; and although he had long ceased to be jealous of her affection, and learnt its fallacy where it interfered with her own interests, he was still thrall'd by her beauty, and subjugated by her wit.

Too indolent to make amusement for himself, Sybil was precisely the woman calculated to supply the occasional void produced by satiety. His taste would do him honour in the eyes of his associates; and moreover, perhaps, he also had something to

revenge. Her treachery had been the one crushed roseleaf on the couch of the fashionable Sybarite; and it was with a sensation of triumphant complacency that he reflected how soon her own hand would be employed to smooth it.

For her improvidence he cared nothing. His means were ample; and he could, moreover, disengage himself at any moment from a tie which must sit loosely from the first. A man does not take his mistress as he takes his wife; there are no life-long responsibilities to make him pause; a fancy prompts the imperfect union, and a caprice may equally annul it.

True, this is a feature in the arrangement to which he allows no prominence in the first season of vanity and adulation, but still the fact exists; and it is for the erring woman who is about to barter her honour and her fair fame against the temporary indulgence of her headstrong passions, and the mortifications of probable abandonment, to remember it in the hour of temptation.

The tiger gives no warning before he springs; it is for the traveller to be wary. The serpent utters no threatening before it stings; the intended victim must defend himself against the venomous tongue; and thus, in like manner, the woman who sees only the gorgeous skin or the gleaming scales of vice, and wilfully closes her eyes against the poison to which they lend a mocking and a worth-

less charm, finds little pity, and excites no sympathy. The man of pleasure uses his natural weapons as the beasts of the forest use theirs, with as much carelessness of consequences, and generally with as little compunction. Selfishness is the foundation of every vice; and where the seducer has all to gain, and his victim all to lose, it is scarcely to be anticipated that he will forego his own purpose in order to shield her from evil.

The antecedents of Sybil were perhaps also calculated to render Sir Horace Trevor even less disposed to shrink from the treachery which he meditated towards a man whom he had called his friend, and a woman whom he had, once at least, sincerely and honourably loved. He knew her reputation to be sullied, and her nature to be essentially egotistical; but she yet remained beneath the roof of her husband; and, weak and faulty as she had undoubtedly shown herself to be, the one great crime against society, the one reckless contempt of its opinion which finds no indulgence even with the most charitable, until it has been bitterly repented, was still uncommitted. She had yet a place among the matrons of her country—yet a chance of redeeming herself in the eyes of the world, and in her own. And he was about to overthrow this last bulwark, and to render her henceforward dependent upon him alone.

Thus, even under all circumstances he might

well have paused. But wherefore? These were considerations for Sybil, not for himself. These were the self-evident consequences of the step which she meditated; and she could require no prompter to point with officious warning to the fact. Moreover, this was the price which she must be content to pay for luxury, liberty and love—for her escape from a cheerless home, an estranged husband, and the trammels of encumbered mediocrity.

What wonder, then, that the worldly baronet stood fully acquitted in his own eyes?

It were idle to dwell upon the scene which ensued when they met. Sybil, with all her meaner passions in arms; smarting under a sense of what she considered as her wrongs; seared by the consciousness of her husband's well-grounded displeasure; devoted to self-indulgence, and shrinking from a future of monotony and privation; did not, and would not, pause to remember that she had not even the excuse of passion to offer for the baseness of which she was about to become guilty: that her attachment to Trevor was merely the impulse of gratified vanity, in which the softer and more womanly delusions of the heart had no share; and that she saw in his proffered love only the prospect which it held out of affluence, and gratified vanity, and that freedom from constraint to which she had so long been accustomed, that it appeared to her to be as indispensable to her existence

as the very air she breathed. Trevor, full of that impassioned egotism which lends eloquence even to a bad cause; believing himself, moreover, enamoured of the first love of his manhood; and mistaking the sullen murmurs of former mortification for the whispers of re-awakened affection.

How could such an interview end save in error? And so indeed it ended. Sybil forgot even her child in the intoxicating dreams of a future, over which she was to be the sole and unquestioned mistress: she forgot the husband who had given himself to her without a doubt or a misgiving, despite the warning voice which would have held him back; she forgot the mother, now hovering between life and death, whose whole existence had long been one unmurmuring vassallage to her single will. She thought only of herself; she trusted only to herself; she saw a new votary at her feet; a new jewel cast upon her path which the world had so lately strown with thorns and brambles; and thus she listened, believed, and yielded.

In such a case the preliminaries of the meditated flight were rapidly and readily arranged; and Trevor had no sooner left the house, than the twice-perjured wife ascended to her own room, and, summoning her maid, busied herself, with a calmness which in a holier cause would have amounted to heroism, in making such arrangements as she deemed necessary. Ere sunset all



was accomplished; her carriage at the door; the imperial freighted with her jewels, and a few indispensable articles of apparel; and then, and then only, while she drew on her gloves to depart, it might be that a thought of her suffering mother obtruded itself, as she suddenly desired Symonds to ascertain if any letter had arrived for her by the late post. The active and watchful Abigail was already prepared to answer. There were half a dozen awaiting the return of her master, but none addressed to her lady; and Sybil asked no more.

Perhaps, even in that last, that supreme moment of her destiny, had she paused as she passed through the hall, to glance at the superscription of the letters so heedlessly flung down, she might yet have paused—yet have been saved. But, no! She had ceased to remember that she was a mother; how, then, could she have lingered to remember that she was a daughter!

Mistress Symonds, with a ready wit which equalled her cupidity, had found an easy pretext for the unaccustomed appendage which was to be affixed to the carriage; and nothing occurred to delay the departure of Sybil from that home which she was never again to enter. Assuredly, the path of vice is ever a smooth one; and if something like a pang shot to her heart as she passed the threshold, and if she cast one back-

ward glance to the windows of the nursery in which her only child was at that moment either slumbering or sporting, unconscious that it would soon be worse than motherless, her step never faltered, her will never failed.

The place of rendezvous had been arranged, and on her arrival Mrs. Mortimer alighted; the imperial was detached, and conveyed into the house; a trivial message delivered to the servants, and the carriage dismissed. All this was very commonplace in seeming, but not so in fact. A gulf, never again to be over-passed, had opened between Sybil and her home—between the wife, the mother, and the woman, and those sacred duties which, once violated, cannot be righteously resumed.

With a moral cowardice, in perfect keeping with his character, Mortimer had delayed to the last moment his return to a disorganized house, and the exertion of an authority which he was conscious must be at once assumed, if he would still preserve himself from ruin; and it was, consequently, late in the night when he once more found himself under his own roof. The hateful task of recrimination and reproach was thus delayed until the morrow; and as he ascended to his dressing-room, already restored by the activity of his valet to a tenantable state, he congratulated himself upon an arrangement by which he had secured some additional hours of tranquillity.

His only inquiry was for his child ; and satisfied that she was well, and sleeping the sweet sleep of innocence and peace, he drew on his dressing-gown, and seated himself at his writing-table, resolved to bestow a few hours to the careful inspection of his steward's accounts before he retired for the night. Upon the desk, however, lay the letters which had been mentioned to Sybil, and he opened them mechanically. The first which came to hand was brief, but a shadow darkened over his brow as he read it ; scarcely did it comprise half-a-dozen lines, yet he pondered over them for several seconds ; and then, by a sudden impulse, he crushed the paper in his hand, and flung it impetuously into the fire which was burning in the grate. His correspondent had simply and courteously acknowledged a cheque for 900*l.*, lost by himself at the gaming-table on the previous evening. The next was longer ; the writing more round, studied, and methodical ; and treated of a debt not yet discharged, in less courtly terms. The third was a civil refusal to exert the interest which he had stooped to solicit in furtherance of his favourite project, by one of his most intimate associates and most frequent guests ; and a bitter smile convulsed his lip as he laid it down. There was still, however, a fourth ; and without even glancing at the superscription, he tore it open. In an instant he had mastered its con-

tents; and, starting from his seat, he rang the bell violently.

In another moment the summons was obeyed.

"Howton;" he said, in considerable agitation; "I have received a letter from Westrum; Mrs. Delamere is dying, and not a moment must be lost if we would again see her alive. Send one of the men to order post-horses; throw together some linen, and whatever you may consider necessary, and let the carriage be at the door by the time your mistress is ready to start. Meanwhile I will go and prepare her. We must be on the road within an hour."

"I fear, Sir, that it will be impossible."

"And why so? Nothing should be impossible at such a moment."

"My lady is from home, Sir."

"From home?—where?—when did she go?"

"She left at about six o'clock, Sir, accompanied by Mrs. Symonds, and dismissed the carriage after alighting at her milliner's."

"And what orders did she give?"

"Merely that the carriage might return, and that she would let them know when she required it again."

"Ha! I see it all now—I understand it all;" said Mortimer in an accent of vexation; "your mistress has found herself inconvenienced by the noise and bustle of the workmen, and has conse-

quently left the house for the night; but surely there must have been some note or message to explain this arrangement to me?"

"Nothing of the kind, Sir, or I should of course have been informed of it."

"Still I am convinced that I am right;" persisted Mortimer; "and she probably determined too suddenly to pursue this plan to remember that I might be uneasy."

"I scarcely think so, Sir;" said the man steadily; "for Mrs. Symonds had the imperial of my mistress's carriage taken to her room early in the day, and it was packed when she left home."

"A convincing proof of the correctness of my suggestion;" retorted Mortimer, without one misgiving; "That fact alone would suffice to satisfy me that I have discovered the truth, as it was impossible that she could pass the night out of her own house without some preparation; but as it is equally impossible that she will remain at her milliner's, and as we do not know to what friend she is gone, I do not feel that I should be justified, under the present circumstances, in delaying my own departure until to-morrow. Prepare everything, therefore, with as much dispatch as possible, while I write a few lines to break this melancholy news to Mrs. Mortimer; and be careful that another set of horses are in readiness for her to follow me immediately on her return home."

The man bowed, and left the room; and if he

marvelled at the blindness of his master, he had at least the discretion to remain silent.

Mortimer assuredly felt no extraordinary affection for Mrs. Delamere—hers was not one of those endearing natures which command attachment; but he respected her as the mother of his wife; and he was aware that the absence of Sybil only rendered his duty to that mother the more imperative. Hastily, therefore, but considerately, he communicated in the note which he proceeded to write, the absolute necessity of her immediate appearance at Westrum; urged her to fortitude, and even to hope; and informed her of the arrangements which he had made to facilitate her journey. Not a word of reproach, not a sentence of harshness or displeasure escaped him; he respected her sorrow, and forgot his own suffering, in order to soothe hers. And when this was done, he stole to the bedside of his slumbering child; not to awaken her, for his moments were counted, but to look fondly and silently upon her cherub face before he left her, and to impress again and again upon the obsequious nurse the necessity of constant vigilance and tenderness.

This was scarcely accomplished, when his travelling-chaise was announced; and five minutes afterwards the portmanteaux and carpet-bags were packed away, master and man were seated in the vehicle, and it drove off in the direction of Westrum at the best speed of four swift horses.

## CHAPTER XX.

By a singular coincidence Sybil and Gertrude quitted London on the same day. The one to immolate upon the altar of vanity all her dignity as a wife, and all her purity as a woman ; and the other, to seek in the bosom of an attached family the reward of her past trials. The one impoverished by her own follies, and burthened with the ruin of the husband who had confided in her ; the other, rich in hope, and about to secure the happiness and prosperity of all whom she best loved.

We cannot follow Sybil and her seducer on their journey. In so far as they are concerned our task is ended. Vice ever writes its own history in blood and tears ; no honest pen can fitly chronicle a career of error and of sin. Angels bow their radiant heads as the dark shadows pass ; and they bow them in silence.

Gertrude left London as she had entered it, pure, humble-minded, and gentle. Not even the officious congratulations of her legal adviser, nor the anxious courtesies of her late uncle's partner, had sufficed to impress her with a conviction of her increased self-importance. She only felt that

she could now repay in some degree the disinterested affection of Ernest, and the friendship of his family. Her spirit was still saddened by the remembrance of the squalid death-bed beside which she had stood so lately ; and she almost felt as though it were a sin to exult in the possession of wealth which had been purchased by such privations. Yet still she smiled as she remembered that she had left one happy heart behind her ; and that the humble Mrs. Sharp, made rich beyond her hopes by the possession of the scanty stock of furniture at Walworth, and permission to follow her in a few months, in order to be established under her roof for life, had blessed her as they parted ; and that the meek old man who now sat beside her in the chaise, proudly attired in a new suit of glossy black, was rescued from a drudgery unsuited to his years by a slight alteration in her uncle's will, which had exchanged the bequest to an income of the same amount.

How cheaply had she thus purchased two grateful hearts ; and how the consciousness that she had done so, lightened the tedium of the way, and beguiled her of the memories which still cast a cloud over her young brow ; and how her pulses bounded as the woods, and streams, and meadows of Bletchley came in sight ; the village street, the dingy cottage, and finally the rigid figure of her aunt !

Miss Warrington looked doubly erect and doubly



stern, as she saw her niece not only alight from an expensive travelling conveyance, but even introduce beneath her roof, and without her permission, a person to whom she was a stranger; but an hour had scarcely elapsed ere Gertrude was forgiven; thanks to the eager zeal of the honest clerk, who, well versed in the jealous captiousness of poverty, at once and effectually proceeded to exorcise the threatening spirit.

A messenger was despatched to the Manor-house to announce the return of Gertrude; and, ere long, Ernest Armstrong bounded into the house. Welcomes and reproaches were poured forth volubly from his lips. Gertrude had no right to sacrifice herself to the selfish caprices of a stranger.

“My dear mother’s only brother!” urged the gentle girl.

“And still a stranger;” persisted the young man as he sat beside her, clasping her hand, and looking anxiously into her face; “And have you reflected on all the results of your ill-advised journey?—Upon your pallid cheeks, which we had taught to bloom again at Bletchley?—Had we not, Miss Warrington?—Upon a responsibility to which you were unequal; and a fatigue, against which you had not physical strength to contend? You smile! Well, then, I will ask only one more question: Has it never occurred to you that the

same quixotic delicacy of feeling which took you, like a lady-errant, to London in search of extraordinary adventures, and which may perhaps prompt you to delay a marriage already definitely fixed at some six weeks hence, may at last weary out my forbearance?"

The happy girl shook her head defyingly.

"Do not be too confident in your own strength, Gertrude;" said Ernest impatiently: "Sydenham vows that Mary shall keep her word; and I vow ——"

Gertrude playfully laid her hand upon his lips.

"And the villa?" she asked.

The young man looked up anxiously and inquiringly.

"You know, Mr. Armstrong, that you half promised me that villa behind the hill, with its pretty shrubberies, and fish-ponds, and balconies, and aviary, and flower-garden. I have set my heart upon becoming its mistress. Are you prepared to gratify me?"

The orphan quailed for an instant as she saw the light fade from the eyes of her lover, and the smile die away upon his face. Could it be that, even for one brief moment, he had mistaken her? But no: Ernest rallied ere the sound of her voice had well ceased, and raising her hand to his lips, he said sadly, but firmly,—

"Alas, my sweet Gertrude, that dream at least

cannot be realised! I have failed in my efforts to secure personal independence—miserably failed; and you must even be content to accept the home which my father offers to us under his own roof. Will you not do this, dearest?"

Gertrude was, even amid her gentleness, still woman enough to exult in her power; and while she returned the fond pressure of his fingers, she whispered softly,—

"No; I must have the villa. It will require—will it not?—at least six months to effect all the alterations which you proposed. When these are completed, and not before, I will, on my side, fulfil my promise."

With a gasp of agony, Ernest Armstrong started to his feet, but she held him back.

"Listen to me;" she said with a pale cheek, and a trembling voice; "listen to me, and forgive me!—I have returned to you rich—fabulously rich—this gentleman—my aunt—will tell you all! Do I not owe respect to the memory of him who has enabled me to give myself to you without a blush at my own penury? I have played with your feelings, and I am self-condemned; pardon me, therefore, and grant my last request: Defer our marriage, and hereafter I will have no will but yours!"

The tale was soon told; and even the lover was convinced, although he still murmured. Gertrude

was restored to him; and, although in the first joy of meeting he was comparatively insensible to the fact that she had returned home a wealthy heiress, an instant's reflection sufficed to convince him of the effect which such a circumstance must naturally produce upon his family. The flushed cheek of Miss Warrington, the proud eye of Mr. Jackson, and the meek affection of the orphan, which almost seemed to ask forgiveness for a prosperity that rendered her his equal in the eyes of the world, all tended to awaken him to a perfect consciousness of the great and unexpected change which had taken place in her fortunes; and yet, it was with a mingled feeling that he murmured, as he released her hand:

“Gertrude, I rejoice for you—for myself—for all!—and still, I would ask you never to forget that I loved you before this strange event had come to pass.”

“When I forget it, may I forget myself;” murmured the orphan, overawed by his emotion. “But why should you look so coldly, Ernest? Is this gold to bring distrust between us?”

Who cannot guess the answer? And who requires to be told that the villa was ready long ere the six months of mourning had expired? Was Gertrude happy? Yes; she had within her all the elements of happiness. Her empire was home—her throne the heart of her husband—her am-

bition a career of virtue, purity, and affection. She was no heroine, as romance-readers understand the term, but a gracious and graceful woman; strong in trial, gentle in prosperity, and firm in right. And yet, she had one more pang to suffer; the last, but the keenest.

It was a fortnight after her return to Bletchley; and it came to her, as sorrows often come, through the most common-place medium—the post. When she rose in the morning, she found a letter which Hannah had laid upon her dressing-table. The hand-writing had been long unseen, but never forgotten.

Thus ran the letter:—

“Gertrude—I used to shun, but I now welcome the idea that you once loved me. I dare not disbelieve the hope. If it were indeed a fact, I am saved; if it were only a fiction, strive, I implore you, for the sake of one as pure, as lovely, and as loving as yourself, to remember that we were bound together in early years by the ties both of relationship and affection. I have no right to appeal to you; nor do I arrogate one. I will not even seek to justify myself at the expense of another. I am conscious, too miserably conscious of all my weakness, all my inconsistency. But my mother—my mother, Gertrude, loved us both. Listen to me; for her sake. I am sitting here alone—alone!—Do you comprehend all the meaning

which may be condensed into that one solitary word?—Alone, in the stately saloon of one of the stateliest mansions of London. My child is above stairs. I dare not trust myself at this moment to see her near me. I have just returned from Westminster; from the vault of my family, where I stood, as an empty niche received the body of—yes, Gertrude, of the mother of my wife, which I had bid them place beside my own;—and would you know where that wife was, at the very moment when I was thus engaged? I will tell you. In the arms of a paramour; a pretended cousin; of a perfidious friend, of a fiend, whose name will hang like a curse upon my lips in my death-agony. Go, sleep amid your riches, will you say to me; proud in your virtuous poverty. You do not know Sybil. She has ruined her child. For myself I care not. What have I to regret? Yet Eva is young, too young to have been contaminated by bad example, or humbled by compassion. Ah, Gertrude, I cannot tell you what she is! Her glorious beauty may perchance be the reflection of her mother's; but her clinging love, her gentle nature, her endearing sweetness—these are all your own. Will you reject her? England is no longer a home for me. The principles which I imbibed from my mother's lips, ill as I have employed them, forbid self-destruction; and I will live on as some expiation for four years of weakness and of folly. But I

cannot endure shame. The first finger which was pointed against me would sear into my spirit like a brand; and, therefore, from henceforth, so long as I may be condemned to drag on an existence which has become weary and loathsome to me, I shall remain an exile. Yes, Gertrude, an exile from all that I have loved: my country, my home, and, above all, my child, my blessed child! But let me not weary you. I have looked my partial ruin steadily in the face; and I have ascertained that it may be repaired by time. Eva is yet an infant; and thus I have ventured to retain a sufficient income to secure me against want, which will be remitted to me by a confidential person, who will know, and will faithfully preserve, the secret of all my movements. When those remittances cease to be claimed, I shall be at peace; and, meanwhile, Eva's prosperity will be secured. Gertrude! This is a last appeal. Receive it as a request from the grave. I shall remain in England until I ascertain that my child is under your protection—happy in your love—safe in your example. I advance no claim upon your pity, your charity, your forbearance. Again I say that I *dare* not. Yet still I hope—

FREDERIC MORTIMER.

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“Who was the beautiful woman with whom you were conversing just now?” asked Lord

Francis Lorimer of his friend Greville, between the pauses of a quadrille.

"Beautiful!" echoed Greville with enthusiasm; "She is an angel! You remember Mortimer, whose wife eloped with Trevor about twenty years ago, when we were somewhat younger than we are to-night, and were dancers instead of lookers-on. Well, that radiant woman was her daughter—a mere infant in the nursery—and see her now! One of the most lovely and the most estimable women in England. How proud —— is of her. By the bye, that was a glorious speech he made in the House last night! He's a rising man, depend upon it? There's good stuff for a minister there. And such a wife!"

"By Jove! she treads like an empress;" exclaimed his listener.

"And feels like a woman;" retorted Lord Francis; "I know but one wife or mother in the kingdom whom I value more than herself; and that is ——"

"Mrs. Armstrong;" said Greville with an animated smile! And glad am I to find that even amid your admiration for younger and brighter beauty, you can still do her justice. Had I fifty sons, I would strive to marry them all to the daughters of Mrs. Armstrong."

THE END.

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